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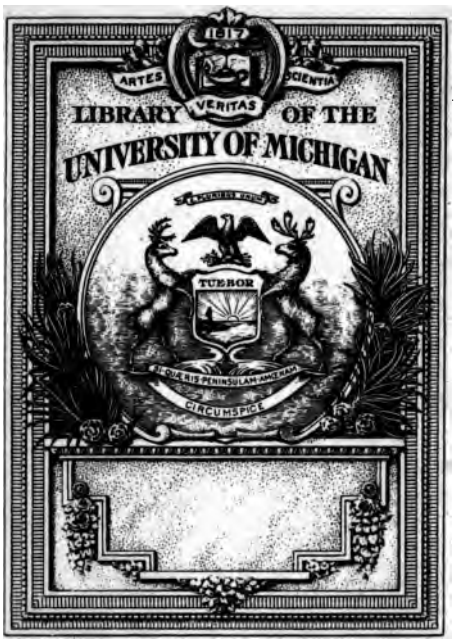
"THIS, MY SON"

RENÉ BAZIN



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"THIS, MY SON"

"THIS, MY SON"

(LES NOELLETS)

BY

RENÉ BAZIN

AUTHOR OF "REDEMPTION," "THE NUN," "THE COMING HARVEST," ETC.

TRANSLATED BY

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"THIS, MY SON."

PART THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

It was an October evening, sad as they always are. There was a death-dealing moisture in the air; the leaves fell as if weary of life, and lay unstirred by the faintest breeze. Flocks of birds were flying home to their nests, and up the steep roadway, one of the hollow roads of the Angevin Vendée, along which the storm sweeps, and where the goats find pasture, a young lad, mounted on his mare, la Huasse, was also making his way back to the farm.

La Huasse, with her rough white coat, her large belly worn bare by the harness, and her cropped mane, which gave her the appearance of a screech-owl, had outgrown her beauty. She moved forward with the resigned gait of an old servitor, used to toil, dragging the hanging traces of her collar along the ground, while her foal gambolled ahead like a wild young fawn. Her rider left her

to choose her own pace. He and she were of about the same age. How many times since he first saw the light fifteen years ago had she not borne him on her back, in the same phlegmatic and maternal manner! And now they were companions in labour. All day they had been together driving the harrow over the low-lying lands. The heat had been great, and the clods of earth hard. They were both tired. And so he let the gentle beast go as slowly as she liked, with her eyes half shut, while he, with his head rising above the hedge into the full light, gazed tranquilly over the magnificent country which claimed him as its child.

To his left was the steep slope of the hill-side, with the alder-bordered Evre at its foot winding round a wooded hillock; beyond were the fields, and further off still was the opposite slope, rising to where the white Mansion of Le Vigneau crowned it like an aigrette. To the right the view differed; here the fields rose in regular curves, marked by long bands of cultivated land, the various colours of the vegetation blending more and more as the light declined. Pierre knew the owners of each patch—the stubble-field with its two rows of apple trees; the field sown with large cabbages where the partridges call to one another; the fallow land whence arose the odour of newly-turned earth. Like a young apprentice beginning to have an opinion of his own about matters, he thought the paternal farm was better cultivated, better manured than others in the neighbourhood, and that it stood unrivalled among them for its

good ploughing and its fine harvests. And what wonder that it was so! The neighbours were all more or less hampered by having to work for others, and by being so heavily rented, while his father——!

He had now reached the first field of La Genivière. An illimitable extent of landscape was here visible. Through the opening of the valley the distant hills rose one above the other, and could be seen as far as Geste and Saint Philbert-en-Mauges, the spires visible finely delineated against the sky, and the woods looking like masses of violet mist. Many little villages, with their roofs of ribbed tiles, lay dotted about glistening in the last rays of the sun.

Sounds crossed one another: the cocks called from the farms and the blackbirds from the brookside; there was a rumbling of carts, a barking of dogs being let loose; now voices called from the houses summoning the men who were far afield and late in returning home; or a footstep sounded one hardly knew where, its echo deadened by the grass and soon dying away. Overhead the stars were beginning to shine, and the immense calm of night was gradually descending upon the land of La Vendée.

Having reached the summit of the hill, Pierre Noellet, before descending to La Genivière, paused in his ride, and drawing himself up, turned his eyes toward a black mass, which darkly blotted the twilight sky. It was La Landehue, standing in the shadow of its fine old trees. A light was burning in one of the windows. "They

are back," thought the boy, and his eyes brightened as he smiled. Would you know why? It was just a child's joy, a childish recollection. It had been so melancholy all the summer to see the house shut up, with no master, and no life about the place. For the first time Monsieur Laubriet had spent the fine season away from La Landehue. And, the master absent, there had been no long trains of carriages, no visitors, no hunting, no blowing of horns. But now the owners of the house had returned, for there was undoubted proof of it.

Pierre Noellet was pleased, and digging his heels into la Huasse, he began to whistle a country tune by way of giving notice of his arrival.

At that very moment, Monsieur Laubriet was entering the yard of La Genivière, which was formed of three buildings: the barn which ran alongside the road; and at right angles to this building, and separated from it by a passage, the farmer's dwelling house on the one side and the stables and cow-sheds on the other. The fourth side was open to the view, and from this point, looking over the tops of the trees which covered the descending slope of the Evre ravine, could be seen the wide-spreading valley.

The lord of the manor was fond of the situation of La Genivière, a farmstead which had formerly belonged to his wife's family, but he was fonder still of the farmer, who was one of the best and richest men of the country. He put his head, with its long delicate face framed in gray whiskers, over the half-door of a room at the end of the house.

"Good day," he called to the farmer's wife. The latter, having just finished laying the table, was on the point of putting the bread into the soup. She held a large round loaf resting against her hip, from which with a regular movement of the hand she was cutting slices, and laying them one above the other in the soup-pot. She was of medium height, and of thin and nervous physique; her face with its regular features was aged before its time, and the mother's soul, that one instinctively felt was forever anxiously on the alert, looked out through the jet-black eyes.

The dancing flame on the hearth, driven hither and thither by the wind which blew a little from all quarters, lit up her figure and shone beyond her on the table, on the polished cherry-wood benches, on the ladder for the bread hanging from the rafters, and on the two four-post beds, furnished, according to ancient fashion, with curtains of gray fustian and yellow coverlets, which flanked each side of the door leading into the adjoining room.

On seeing the lord of the manor, Perrine Noellet put the bread down on the table, and quickly caught up the corner of her apron, which was, no doubt, not entirely spotless.

"Good day, Monsieur Hubert," she said; "you have come back then."

"Rather late in the day, is it not? We have just returned from a three months' tour in Switzerland and Italy which I would willingly have been spared, for you know that I love this country, my home of Landehue, my woods and my

parish of Fief-Sauvin, above all other places. But what would you have? My daughters dragged me off; you can't have your own way with them when they are grown up as you did when they were little."

"And pray why not?"

"Yes, yes, I know. The old rule, the paternal authority of past days, is still kept up in your home; but I, you see, I am one of the moderns, and I spoil my girls a bit. Will you believe it now that Madeleine is no longer satisfied with her pony and little carriage, but wants me to give her a hunter. Ah, these children!"

"And a very beautiful daughter you have in her, Monsieur Hubert."

"You think so?" said Monsieur Hubert, smiling and flattered. "And how is your husband?"

Perrine Noellet's figure seemed to expand as she looked toward the door and exclaimed, "Here he is."

The farmer, seeing Monsieur Laubriet, had paused on the threshold. His tall figure nearly filled up the doorway. The head was large, the face square and clean shaven, the lips thin, the eyes deeply sunk under bushy eyebrows, the expression of the whole countenance serious, and just a little hard.

His hair, cut short on the forehead, hung low behind over the collar of his coat. Forty-five years of toil under the sun had neither impoverished nor bent him, and it was enough to see his straightforward gaze as he advanced toward his

guest and grasped his hand with respectful familiarity to know at once that here was a man of upright character and of ancient race, and a master in his own house.

The children followed their father into the room: first a little girl, Antoinette, with a black cap on her head, from under which one golden lock of hair had escaped—she went up to Monsieur Laubriet, and offered her cheek to him in an innocent way; then came Pierre, the rider of la Huasse; Jacques, his younger brother, pale and slender, with large eyes as soft as periwinkles; and, finally, Marie, the eldest of the family, a brunette, already somewhat grave in manner, who turned down her rolled-up sleeves as she went and stood by her mother.

Monsieur Laubriet looked round on them all, pausing when he came to Marie.

"Seventeen, is she not, Farmer?" he said.

"Yes, Monsieur Hubert."

"That makes you old, friend."

"It makes us all old," replied the farmer, with a half smile on his sun-burnt lips.

"And my godson!" continued the lord of the manor, pointing toward Pierre, "how he has grown! What age is he now?"

"Fifteen."

"And is what I hear true, my boy, you are learning Latin with the Abbé?"

Pierre kept his head bent, and continued gazing at his shoes with an air of discontent.

"Answer, my son," said the farmer, as a look of pride, like a flame, brought a light into his face.

"Since Monsieur Hubert speaks to you, answer him."

The boy, without lifting his head, half raised his eyes, for just sufficient time to show that they were lighter and harder than those of his father; then in a tone which betrayed a consciousness of wounded vanity:

"I am doing Greek as well," he said.

"To think of that! Greek as well! We shall be seeing you at the College of Beaupréau next year, I suppose."

"That is what he thinks of doing," replied the father.

"I am delighted," exclaimed Monsieur Laubriet. "Read, work, teach yourself all you can, Pierre; with your intelligence you will soon catch the others. And now I wish you all good appetite! I could not let my first day at La Landehue pass without saying good day to La Genivière. But I have said it now, so I will be off." And as he walked away, followed by a chorus of young voices, calling out, "Good evening, Monsieur Hubert—Good-by, Monsieur Hubert—*A vous revoir*, Monsieur Hubert," he turned to the farmer who was accompanying him, with the words:

"I congratulate you, my friend; one son a priest, another a field-labourer—it is the picture of our Vendée. He is a good boy, your Pierre?"

"I can't say no: but a little too proud in his ways. However, that will pass away, I hope, since God has chosen him for His service. Jacques will be easier to manage, Monsieur Hubert."

"Indeed!"

"More tender and loving to his mother, and an indefatigable worker into the bargain, as good as a young horse; he will never give in as long as his strength lasts out."

"A genuine farmer, in short."

"Just so."

"You are a lucky man, Julien, so don't grumble."

The farmer had walked to the end of the road that ran beside the barn, and he now shook Monsieur Laubriet by the hand, as he answered in his quiet, rather drawling voice:

"I am not grumbling, don't think it."

Then he returned to the house, where nothing was to be heard but the talking and laughing of the children, and the clack of wooden shoes on the well-trodden earth floor. A farm servant followed him in. The men went and took down their spoons, which were hung on the wall by a leathern strap, and then seated themselves round the smoking soup. The women ate theirs standing about here and there, as was customary; they spoke little themselves, listening to the men as they discussed the work of the past day and of the morrow in short fragmentary sentences between the silences imposed by their voracious hunger.

There was an air of prosperity about the farm and its inmates. The parents were healthy, the children well-grown and lively. The servant, robust and composed, was in himself a proof of his master's honourable position. There was neither crack nor chip in the earthenware dish which stood loaded with bacon and cabbages, nor

in the blue-flowered salad bowl piled high with fresh lettuces. Every bit of furniture was bright with polish.

Outside in the cow-sheds, whence could be heard from time to time the rattle of chains over the wooden mangers, stood some of the best-fed beasts in the country; milch cows, whose butter was at a premium in the Beaupréau market; six oxen that, when ploughing together, were a superb sight; the old mare, La Huasse, and her foal, as well as pigs, several broods of chickens and ducks, without naming the goat—a solemn animal said to be indispensable for the health of the flocks. And in order to keep this household of human beings and animals alive, seventy acres or so of land, cultivated, if according to a somewhat old-fashioned routine, still with the greatest care, for Julien Noellet was his own master at La Genivière. It was his estate, his landed property, the fruit of the labour of many generations of ancestors.

How all those, since passed away, those obscure dwellers upon the earth, now taking their last sleep in the adjoining churchyards, hoped and worked and struggled and saved to make and keep the land their own! One thought alone pursued them as they went from farm to farm in their slow pilgrimage across the Mauges, serving first one master and then another. At night, when, bent with the fatigue of the day, they returned to their chimney corner, and sat in the dim light to save the candle, they would see a vision of a white house, a well-lighted house,

where some great-grandson—their own death, they knew, was near—would reign as independent lord. They found consolation in their own misery in this dream of joy for another who should in his person realize the ambition of a whole race. And then they died, and their small savings increased in the hands of the eldest son, more or less slowly according as the harvests were good or bad, but whatever the fortune of the years, the money put by lay untouched for purchase or pledge. Then suddenly a good marriage might double the property, and in this way it had come about that with the money hidden away in a stone jar, added to the price of a little garden he owned in the parish of Villeneuve, and his wife's dowry, Julien Noellet's father had been enabled to purchase La Genivière, which had been put up for sale by its ancient proprietors of La Landehue during an interval of pecuniary embarrassment.

And now here was the heir of all this obstinate labour looked up to with respect on account of his fortune, which was the largest possessed by any of the farmers of that district, and even more on account of his character. He had inherited the spirit of order, which had been the main strength of his race, together with the desire to add to his property; with these traits was combined the liberality that is always associated with righteously acquired ease of circumstance; and to crown all there was his fine face, which expanded into a smile of serene confidence as he looked round on those belonging to him. He loved the land with a profound and devoted love; he was an alms-

giver and a believer. Yes, the dream of the older race had been realized, and the one they had seen in their visions was now occupying the white house of La Genivière, on the slope of the Fief-Sauvin, facing the same horizon that they had seen, under the same wide-spreading sky.

CHAPTER II.

IT was quite true. Pierre was beginning to study Latin with Abbé Heurtebise, the parish priest of Villeneuve, which is one of the smallest of the parishes into which the commune of Fief-Sauvin is divided.

While still a child at the elementary school he had been distinguished among the other pupils by his ardent desire to learn and to get ahead of his companions. His brother Jacques, who was hardly a year younger than himself, read with difficulty, and had no liking for it, nor any greater love for writing, which he only performed as a task and when under the master's eye. As to his thoughts, they were occupied merely with such simple matters as were generally found interesting by the lads of the town: his sisters, the traps he had set, a nest he had discovered which was to lead to a little bird-nesting when school was over, with racing bareheaded over the fields, shouting and stamping in the sun after four o'clock in the afternoon, and, above all, with Pierre, whom he loved to distraction.

Pierre was for him the one and only master, a kind of presiding genius, a being who could order all things according to his pleasure. No one rejoiced at Pierre's success more heartily than Jacques. Saturday, the pay-day of school-boys as

well as of men, he would hurry and get home first, and, arriving at the farm streaming with sweat, cry out, "Pierre has won the cross! Maman, Pierre has won the cross!" and embrace his mother in the joy of his triumph, while she would ask, "And you, Jacques, my boy?" Then he would give a little pout and indicate that he himself had nothing, but he was soon his own contented self again. Everybody is not born for the cross, and it is not everybody who cares for it.

A moment later the elder brother would come in, looking a little haughty, as his father had said, with his books under his arm and his hand on his hip. He allowed himself to be kissed and complimented, and then went and sat himself down without a moment's delay at the table that had been bought expressly for him, and that was reserved for his books and papers—an unheard-of luxury at La Genivière—while Jacques called in the cattle that were loath to leave the watering-place, or brought in the sheep. "What a pity some one does not give that boy a lift!" the teacher would often remark; "he would make his way well."

To look at the two brothers was sufficient to make one aware of the difference of character between them. The younger, who had shot up too quickly, and stooped, looking like the untrained sapling of a poplar, had the face of a girl; his pink skin was covered with freckles, and in his lively blue eyes could be read nothing beyond the joy of life. Wild and nimble, he would run away

at the sight of a pedlar, or a sheep-dealer who happened to come into the courtyard. Except on these rare occasions, he never voluntarily forsook the house; he helped his father, he helped his mother, he helped his sisters, he helped the farm labourers. His heart was bound up with La Genivière, and he found happiness in his home life.

Pierre was a different young man altogether. In person he was like his father—dark, heavily built, with regularly cut features. The square jaw and the thin mouth indicated an energetic will, but the strength of the nature was even more clearly shown in the eyes. It was difficult to say whether they were blue or green; deeply set under the shadowing brow, they looked out with that direct, ardent, unflinching glance which belongs to those overmastering characters that pass rapidly from one extreme to another.

They flamed up in a moment at the least reproof or the slightest contradiction. When at rest they were somewhat haughty in their expression; they rarely grew tender. But the mother loved her Pierre's dark eyes, and when she met them fixed on her, the thought would flash through her, too, that her Noellet had not his equal throughout the Mauges.

Possibly she had said it in so many words, and neither these words nor the unspoken flattery of the smiles that were lavished upon him escaped the boy's notice. When thirteen years of age he had been taken away from school, and immediately put in the place of the second farm servant,

who was dismissed, the father rejoicing at having a son to help him. But the scholar survived his schooling—which was not generally the case in the country—and Pierre continued his reading, and did not lose his desire for knowledge. His heart was not in his daily labour, nor did he share in the rough joy of the harvest. He did his work well, but found no pleasure in it, and he had a habit of going off by himself during the intervals of rest for the horses instead of staying to laugh with the others; and the indifference with which he looked at the cattle in the sheds was a sorrow to his father, whose one pride was in his farm. What Pierre enjoyed was to sit reading in the evening or on Sunday either the books he borrowed from the lending library which had been established at Fief-Sauvin by the Laubriets, or bits of newspapers that had wrapped up caps or shoes, purchases by his sisters at Beaupréau; even the placards on the walls were a pleasure to him.

At the fairs, whither he now accompanied his father, he listened to the conversations of the grain and cattle dealers, who are extensive travellers and have something to say about everything. Many things to which his father turned an indifferent ear, although he heard them equally, attracted his attention, and he would ponder over these as he worked in the fields. And so it was that an atmosphere of ideas and imagination grew up around him wherein he lived apart. Every day the distance widened between his thoughts, his opinions, his tastes, and those of his parents.

They had but a vague consciousness of this, but he was more acutely aware of it. A restless ambition seized him, a longing to rise, and everything continually added fuel to his desires; from men and creatures, from all sides, from over the hills, the church towers and the rivers, came that mysterious influence, which reaches to the humble roofs, like those of La Genivière standing on its wooded slope, that rise far away from the great centres. But Pierre Noellet took no one into his confidence, and none could tell what was passing in his mind.

Suddenly, on the morrow of his fourteenth birthday, he expressed his intention of becoming a priest. The choice of this vocation was not surprising in this sacerdotal territory of La Vendée, where now, as before the Revolution, God levies each year a tithe of young servitors. His mother was delighted. At the bottom of her heart she had often envied the women of the neighbourhood who had a son in the church, either a parish priest or a curate, and who were to be seen at rare intervals walking with him, overcome with emotion and a certain embarrassment between their love for the son and their respect for the priest. She had, therefore, no hesitation in giving her consent, and would have liked the father to do the same, but, for the moment, he refused his assent to the project. It was, doubtless, only a boy's fancy, and would not last, and he was not going to deprive himself for that of so serviceable a son, or renounce his hope of seeing Pierre one day take the direction of the farm into his own hands; still

less could he contemplate the thought of sending him away, and of undertaking for several years to come the heavy expense of lodgings, books, and clothes. No, he must wait at least another twelve months before he could give consideration even to such a proposition. And for a whole year the subject was never mentioned again between Julien and his son. Pierre continued to plough and harrow, and to cut the clover, and the grass for hay, like any future farmer, without a single allusion to the matter which had divided them.

But as September drew near, the year of waiting having expired, Pierre renewed his request. A further delay could not reasonably be asked for on this occasion. It must be either consent or refusal. The farmer, accordingly, gave in to necessity, and went to talk over the matter with the priest of Villeneuve. Abbé Heurtebise thereupon sent for the boy, questioned him, and replied to his father: "There are things to be said both for and against it, but on the whole, more for than against, and as one can never be sure how things may turn out, let the boy come to me three times a week, and I will take the responsibility: next year he ought to be ready to enter the college of Beaupréau, and I promise you he will not enter a low class."

Since which time, Pierre Noellet, his bag under his arm, had regularly attended the Presbytery at Villeneuve. This old bag, a large leathern pouch, originally of a yellow colour, which had done duty at school, and served in turn as a club, as a cushion, and as a receptacle for stolen birds'

eggs, dirty, and out of shape as it was, Pierre carried with pride, now that he could show that it held Latin books, dictionaries, large volumes of Greek and French history, and exercise books, half bound in boards, such as a youth of his age had never seen before, much less had the honour of possessing. On his way he frequently met one or other of his old school-fellows, with whom he had studied reading and writing, and their looks of astonishment were a pleasant flattery to him. He made them hold out the dictionaries at arm's length and feel the weight of them. It was a prouder moment still when the scholar opened at random before these bovine apprentices the "De Viris Illustribus" of the worthy Lhomond, and made them spell a Latin phrase.

"Do you understand?" he would ask.

"Not I," would be the answer. And Pierre would shrug his shoulders and remark that, nevertheless, it was quite easy; it merely meant that Epaminondas died at Mantinea.

Epaminondas, Mantinea, words such as these were quite sufficient to win for any one the reputation of a scholar at Fief-Sauvin, and it was not long after he had started his mysterious classical studies before Pierre Noellet found himself the object of a certain consideration, not only among those of his own age, but also among the elders.

To reach the Presbytery he had to pass through the whole length of Fief-Sauvin, and to walk the best part of a mile beyond; on the way he passed the house of more than one of his friends, who would greet him with a few kindly or jesting

words, or a nod, or a bow, all unmistakable signs of his growing importance. Fauvêpre, the smith and wheelwright, a big jovial man, whose forge stood to the right at the top of the hill, would leave off his shoeing, and call out to him, the horse's hoof still held against his leathern apron: "Good day, Rosa la rose!" The elder Huet, wholesale and retail grocer, who always stood three paces from his door, in order to be able to say "After you," to his customer, and so had won for himself a reputation of urbanity, nodded his head backward and forward as he saw him pass. Mother Mitard, the dropsical lady of property, would send him a smile through one of the windows of her new house; the innkeeper, who was a Liberal, with a shrug of his shoulders, would exclaim: "A shame to turn a fellow like you into a priest! Get away, you idle dog!"

At the further end of Fief-Sauvin, to the left, stood also the dwelling of Nicholas Rainette, the weaver, who was more often to be found at the inn than at his work. His want of application to his trade, however, was compensated for by his daughter Mélie, who did the work of two pairs of hands; she was about a year older than Pierre and his sister's particular friend. She might be seen through the low windows of the cellar at all hours of the day, leaning over the heavy wooden machine, as she sent the shuttle flying, as if it were a gray mouse, athwart the tightly-stretched threads. Mélie had nothing to say as Pierre went by; she only raised her eyes, while the face for a moment grew less serious, and as long as he could

be seen through the narrow opening, she kept her gaze upon him.

Pierre, thinking of nothing in particular, or repeating his lessons to himself, continued his way along the road that wound across the plateau, which brought him in a quarter of an hour to Villeneuve—that is to say, to a group of houses and gardens which clustered in a disorderly manner around the church. Close to the church stood the Presbytery, equally new and redolent of plaster. Between the two was a disused courtyard overrun with aromatic herbs, lavender, hyssop, and sage.

Pierre entered the house.

"Is Monsieur le Curé not in, Gillette?"

"You know as well as I do that he is out in the field; why do you want to have the same thing told you every day?"

The field consisted merely of a narrow strip of ground behind the Presbytery, where the grass, eaten close by the cow, and trampled over by the priest's wooden shoes or those of his parishioners, had little chance of growing. Nevertheless the abbé never spoke of it without reverence, and seemed to find an incredible pleasure in its possession. He was a tall, long-legged, upright old man, large of bone, with closely-cut curly white hair, a neck bronzed by the sun, a long thick nose, and two small extremely black eyes almost lost beneath the gray eyebrows. He greeted his pupil with solemnity, responded to his good day with an inclination of the head, and then took Pierre's work from his trembling hands. Presently he

began to move about, to puff and blow, and then suddenly stopped and gazed at the boy in a terrifying manner.

"You did all that by yourself?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Curé."

"No one gave you any help?"

"Why, Monsieur le Curé, who is there, do you think, to give me help?"

"I can hardly believe it—my word! Everything understood, and not a fault. Such an exercise as in my time was given to the Fifths!"

And then for the next hour or two the field resounded with Latin words, with apostrophes, with geographical and historical names which were well calculated to disconcert the old people seated not far off on their several doorsteps, and who amid the silent atmosphere of their homes could catch every sound.

The sitting lasted as long as was required for the correction of exercises and repeating of lessons. Then the pupil, his satchel over his shoulder, wended his way home again, generally choosing the short cut, athirst for liberty and violent exercise. He longed for fatigue of body as a relaxation for his tired mind, and reaching home at the hour when master and men, with all the long day's labour behind them, were beginning to feel less stalwart, he would set to work and outdo them all, whether it was a question of mowing a corner of clover for the cattle, holding the plough, climbing barefoot into the chestnut tree to shake down the fruit, or of cutting the stalk of a potato with a single stroke. Now that it was no longer

his actual calling, and that no one obliged him to do it, he liked this rougher kind of farm labour. He performed it with the ease of a strong, full-grown man, and the father, watching him, could not help thinking what a splendid farmer he would have made. Then he sighed, only to reproach himself afterward for this momentary weakness.

It was only by fits and starts, however, that Pierre occupied himself with the more serious duties connected with the farm. In order to give him time to study, he was sent with his books and papers to watch the cows in place of his sisters. And it was while thus employed, surrounded by Nature, amid the speaking solitude of the country, that his mind for the first time conceived the idea of letters. A fine school for him, and how well he profited by it! He was carried away by an intense fever of life, which he mistook for thought. There were wonderful vistas along all the new paths which now opened to him—tumultuous processions of dreams, of floating figures, of vague aspirations. At moments his heart also became surcharged, and he was astonished at this new joy which had so suddenly come to him. The most ordinary things, seen or heard a hundred times before, the pale billows of waving corn, the opening out of the little valleys, a group of trees, the cattle-call, which he had sung out himself, echoing from hill to hill—everything seemed to intoxicate him. A longing possessed him to thank the trees, the grass, and the sky for being beautiful, smiling, and young like himself. Why, he asked

himself, was there all this rejoicing in the world, so that everything around him was radiant; and at certain softer hours of the day, if he lifted his eyes from his books, he would immediately close them, his very heart seeming to melt within him.

He frequently did not return home till supper time. The meal over, he would remain in the general room, which was known as the *Maison*, and where he slept with Jacques, while his mother and sisters would retire into the adjoining apartment, the tidiest and best furnished in the farm, and called in La Vendée the *Chambre*. His lessons were not always finished by this time, for Abbé Heurtebise gave him plenty to do. Sometimes the young scholar sat up another hour, or even two. The fire would die out on the hearth, large red mushrooms appear on the wick of the tallow candle, a smell of yeast steal from the bin, while Jacques snored as he lay with one shoulder uncovered and casting a shadow on the wall, and still the little pen with its death's head went scratching over the paper, until the mother, in bed on the other side of the wall, catching sight of the light under the door, would call in a low voice, as she tapped with her finger against the partition:

"Put out the candle, my Noellet; it is getting late."

He obeyed. But his nerves were often too excited for him to sleep, and he would open the door on to the court and draw in the fresh air, or amuse himself with looking up through the opening of the wide chimney and counting the stars which

he could see passing overhead. There were some of these for which he had a particular affection, among them the three in the belt of Orion; and as he was not without a desire for glory, he would dream sometimes that he wore one of these on his forehead and the other two at his ears, and that thus adorned he paraded magnificently among the constellations.

CHAPTER III.

MÉLIE also had a star of her own which she loved. At a certain hour of the morning, which varied with the seasons, a ray of light shot over the roof of the opposite house, and fell through the window of her low room. It shone all day, gliding over the great wooden roller, round which the cloth was wound, or on to the frame, which had grown polished with constant friction as it was regularly driven backward and forward by the weaver's hands. Mélie knew it well and greeted it with a smile. She missed it sorely on dark days, and when it lost itself in the evening in the corner of the cellar among the old barrels heaped with skeins of thread and odd pieces, she felt a tightening of the heart.

That little ray of light, you see, meant joy. And there was so little of this in the weaver's home!

No house in Fief-Sauvin was older or more dilapidated.

The sunk and bulging old walls were seamed with cracks, and only held together in places by the kindly mosses. The roof was crooked with age, and had given way between each of the rafters. The house itself consisted only of a passage, a room on the right for the father, where was the trap-door leading down into the cellar, and another on the left for Mélie. This, with the little

garden at the back, was all the property they possessed, and it would have been necessary to deduct the owner's debts before making quite sure, even then, of what they were worth. He owed money at all the public-houses of his own and the neighbouring villages. Père Rainette drank. During the time his wife was alive it was asserted that he was only drunk once in every two days. But this must have been a mistake. Mélie could remember nothing of the kind; since her infancy she had been familiar with all the lugubrious drama of drink and poverty, and all that she could recall of her mother was of a wretched, meek, beaten woman, who rejoiced at death as at a deliverance from misery.

In order to keep her away as much as possible from her unhappy home, the Sisters of the school had allowed her to stay on after she had completed the regulation number of years, and had taught her everything which they knew themselves: a great deal of gentleness and pity, a little literature, sufficient for the preliminary certificate, and many pretty secrets of needlework, of lace-making, crochet, and embroidery, in which arts they excelled. Her intercourse with them had not only made Mélie one of the most skilled needlewomen in Fief-Sauvin, but had developed the soul in her, which was naturally refined. She had caught something of their manners and tone from these women of humble birth, whose vocation rendered them superior to their surroundings. She knew nothing of the coarse gaiety of the country-people, and was annoyed at the equivocal

jests which were passed round at wedding feasts. The pale cheeks, with their one patch of faint colour on either cheek-bone, seemed to have known the protecting shadow of the convent cap. Outside matters awakened no curiosity in her—she had too much to do at home. Her mother being dead—she had been gone now eighteen months—the duties of housekeeping fell on her, and since her father worked rarely, if at all, she had to make money for both. Nicholas Rainette was generally willing to go down into the cellar in the morning and take his place opposite Mélie, and then, clac, clac, clac, clac, the weaving song would start, echoed by the same clac, clac, clac, of Mélie's machine. He was a good weaver, and the cloth seemed to roll out under his hands, so quickly did his shuttle fly, but he had scarcely done half-a-day's work before he would suddenly disappear, as if summoned by some irresistible power.

His orgies at the tavern cost him more than he had earned. Furthermore, the manufacturer, who employed some dozens, at times some hundreds, of hands and who supplied the thread and paid for the cloth, would not put up with having the work delivered a week late.

So Mélie made up her mind. Her own piece being finished, she went on with the one left half done by her father, and when Nicholas Rainette returned after dark, dead drunk, knocking himself against the wall as he felt for his bed, she rose from her task, tired and content, and taking her shawl, went out for a turn along the road.

There were days when she sat on longer to accomplish some lesser piece of work which had been committed to her clever fingers; perhaps a cap to mend, a frill to make up, or a monogram to embroider. Two or three such trifles were generally lying in her cupboard awaiting a moment of leisure.

She had no time, therefore, for trifling. The sellers of pigs and calves, who trotted past in their covered carts, drawn by their lank horses, cracked their whips in vain, for they never caught sight of so much as the colour of the eyes of the dark girl leaning busily over her weaving. A quick sign of recognition was all she vouchsafed even to her older acquaintances of the village, who came and tapped with their sticks on the window frame, by way of amusing themselves. But there came a day when she broke through her usual habits in a surprising manner.

It was a morning of April, the Eve of Palm Sunday. Pierre had now been studying Latin for six months, and although the winter was over, and the sun already shone warmly down on his daily route, he still wore the cap of imitation otter-skin that had been a present to him from his mother for the new year, and of which the other mothers in Fief spoke as being an unheard-of luxury. The fur looked well on his light-coloured hair. His blue blouse was fastened round the waist with a bright leather waistband quite in the correct style. Pierre was beginning to take pains with his appearance, as was natural to a growing youth.

He had just paused on the farther side of the road and was looking up at the wistaria growing over Mère Mitard's house; it was a fine old twisted creeper, from which were already hanging masses of downy clusters ready to break into flower.

"Good day, Pierre."

He turned at the sound of the voice, and seeing the girl standing in the doorway:

"Is it you, Mélie?" he said with a tone of surprise in his voice. Then he crossed the road with his swinging gait and joined her as she stood framed in the doorway; she leant against the lintel as he began conversing with her.

The usually pale Mélie had turned a little red, partly at the daring on her part of having addressed him, partly on account of his observant looks. But she had had her reason for calling him.

"I am not sure if I did right in calling you simply by your name," she said. "Now that you are studying I ought perhaps to have said Monsieur Pierre."

"You are laughing at me," said the young scholar, who was inwardly flattered. "What work have you there?"

"A piece of fine mending, so fine that I can hardly see to do it."

"And it was to show me how well you work that you called me? I guessed that was it, Mélie."

"Indeed, no such thing, you silly boy; I wanted to ask you if you had any palm for tomorrow."

"I don't think so. Have you some to sell?"

"To sell, no!" she replied, somewhat offended; "what I have I give. Formerly, when all the young ladies from Landehue came here for Easter, they used to strip my rosemary bush. But now they no longer do this, I have plenty to give to my friends, if you would care to have some."

"Certainly, Mélie. Only let us make haste, for I have my lesson."

"Come," she said.

She rose, and Pierre opened the door of the house. At the farther end of the passage lay the Rainettes' primitive garden plot, which consisted of a small path between two ill-kept beds; two pear trees stood at the nearer end, and two plum trees at the other, while here and there among the cabbages and celery there was a clump of tulips or of polyanthuses which had seen many generations. The rosemary grew in the farther left-hand corner, at the angle of the quick-set hedge, which was hidden in all directions by its splendid, plume-like branches, which formed a veritable bush of silvery and mauve flowers. On the farther side ran a path.

Mélie and Pierre went up to the rosemary bush, whence came the sound of many humming bees. Then the girl began to cut off the finest branches, handing them one by one to her companion.

"See, this branch is for your father, this for your mother, this for Marie, and that for you."

The "for you" was the magnificent top branch which crowned the others.

"How sweet they smell," said Pierre in response.

"For Jacques, for Antoinette," continued Mélie.

"Do you know, Mélie, that you are still taller than I am."

"Do you think so, Pierre?"

"Well, look!"

"This for your farm-servant."

She drew herself up to her full height beside Pierre.

"It's true, Mélie; your shoulder is a good inch or two above mine. After all, it is not surprising, for you are older than I am."

"Oh!" she answered, laughing, "hardly more than a year; what is that? Anyhow, you are already my elder in mind; I hear you are quite learned!"

"Not yet, Mélie, but I shall be some day. What a kind girl you are; I am sorry I cannot stay longer with you!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Mélie.

"But my lesson is awaiting me, and I am already late."

She helped him gather the flowering branches together, and placed them on his arm, full of a childish joy at having thought of them for the morrow. He went back through the garden, she following; he waved her a cheerful good-by as he reached the door, and then went off humming. She gave him a little parting nod, and watched his figure as it gradually retreated along the sunlit road in the direction of Villeneuve.

CHAPTER IV.

THE abbé's pupil made such rapid progress that by the end of the first year of study his master began to feel uncomfortable. The abbé had taken what was considered a high class in his youth, but that was now some time back, and in spite of his efforts he was aware of his own lack of knowledge in many branches of the vast mass of erudition which was necessary for any one who wished to be even the meanest bachelor of arts. The quick, argumentative, and questioning mind of Pierre was becoming embarrassing. In vain the professor tried to shield himself behind such subterfuges as "it would be too long a matter to explain to you," or "that is a delicate point, to which we will return another time"; his scruples were not relieved by these formulas. Certain solecisms, excusable of their kind, would return to his memory with the persistence of remorse during the quiet hours of devotion, and the good man would blush as if guilty of dishonesty as a teacher.

"My boy," he said one day, "I am going to send you to the college, where they will be responsible for you."

And, in fact, he carried on all the negotiations for Pierre's admittance into the Seminary at Beaupréau. Hearing from him of his pupil's

capacity, and taking into consideration the latter's advanced age, the authorities arranged that he should be placed among the fourths.

During the two months which preceded his entry into collegiate life, the needles at La Genivière were industriously plied in order to get Pierre's trousseau ready. All his linen had to be marked with his number. Such trousers and coats as were still serviceable were carefully overhauled, and the weak places in them neatly repaired. The village tailor had orders for a complete suit. He spent immense pains upon it, but his scissors knew but one style of cut, and the result was a coat which would have been quite the correct kind of garment for the father. Nobody, however, minded this, and it was indeed with a feeling of maternal pride that the farmer's wife, having brushed and combed her son's hair on October 3, said:

"You will put on your new coat, my Noellet, to go and say good-by to your godfather."

None of the Noellet children ever thought of disputing orders, so Pierre did as he was told. This visit to Landehue, however, caused him a considerable amount of trepidation. He never felt less at his ease than on Sundays, when he met the Laubriet family in the village. In presence of these well-dressed and well-bred people he felt awkward and flustered. He studied their general appearance, and pondered over the difference between their manners and his own. On each of these occasions he was conscious of an irritability and a sense of confusion of which he spoke to no

one, for neither his father nor his sisters appeared to be troubled with any feelings of the kind.

In proof of which, behold the mother already on her way, in gala attire, with her closely-fluted cap fastened with a beautiful ribbon bow, her velvet kerchief looking as if fresh from a band-box, and her dress held up with both hands. As a finishing touch, she had thrown her black hood over her head, not liking to be seen only in a cap —"en tête blanche," as she expressed it—on such a solemn occasion. She walked with her usual short, measured, and dignified pace, and in spite of the superb weather, carried the brown cotton umbrella which had done duty for the whole of the Noellet dynasty under her left arm.

It was no great distance from La Genivière to Landehue by the way of the fields. After walking about a hundred paces along the path which led up to Landehue, there was a cross-bar gate, and a little lane which opened on the principal path across the fields, a few clumps of trees, and then the house itself. Pierre longed to turn and flee. The very windows seemed to be watching their approach, and behind the closed shutters he could fancy he detected smothered bursts of laughter: "Aren't they a droll couple—look, Pierre Noellet and his mother? Oh, just see the umbrella which the good woman is carrying! And the boy's coat! Oh, and his hands!"

Pierre did not know what to do with his hands. He was red in the face, and bit his lips, and was annoyed at seeing his mother walking so undisturbedly beside him, and stooping down to exam-

ine the flower-beds, which bordered the whole length of the avenue.

"What lovely flowers they have here, my Noellet! But be sure you don't pick any of them!"

As if, when one was past sixteen years of age, and on the way to the great house at La Landehue, one had any wish to pick flowers!

A footman had hardly shown them into the little study where Monsieur Laubriet interviewed the farmers, when the latter himself entered. On seeing the farmer's wife, he gave a friendly wave of the arm by way of greeting and invitation.

"My good woman," he said, "this is not the place in which to receive you. Bring this young collegian into the drawing-room; the ladies will be delighted to see him."

"You are too good, Monsieur Hubert." And without further ceremony she walked out after Monsieur Laubriet, who had taken hold of Pierre's arm.

"Ah, ah! your son is the pride and glory of Fief-Sauvin." Pierre slipped and stumbled over the parquetted floor of the corridor, and over the Italian mosaic of the hall, and his heart beat furiously as, having reached the drawing-room, Monsieur Laubriet threw open the door, saying as he did so:

"My dear, let me introduce one of the new fourths to you. Only a year's training; it is marvellous, marvellous!"

Pierre was quick to perceive a slight gesture of ill-temper on the part of Madame Laubriet—a tall, strongly built woman, who had not lost all

her beauty; she was reposing drowsily in her cane arm-chair, which was decorated with wool pompons.

"I shall be delighted," she said in a low voice. "Come in, Pierre."

He advanced toward her, redder than the cerise-coloured hangings and furniture of the huge room, dazzled by the reflection of the mirrors, by the gilding and the chandeliers, intoxicated with the scent of verbena, a delicate perfume to which he was a stranger. Behind him he could hear the clamp of his mother's iron-tipped shoes.

Madame Laubriet made a sign to him to take a seat on the divan in the middle of the room, from the centre of which rose a jardinière full of ferns. Pierre thought she was holding out her hand to him, and awkwardly seized the chatelaine's white plump fingers, and then, in his politeness, not wishing to turn his back upon her, retired, facing her, and sat down on an open book. He got up quickly, and put the book aside. At the end of the room near the windows, which were shaded with light, cream-coloured curtains, Monsieur Laubriet's two daughters—children respectively of fifteen and twelve years of age—leaned forward as if to pick up a pencil that had fallen, in reality to conceal an irresistible fit of laughter.

Monsieur Laubriet called out imperiously to the eldest girl:

"Madeleine!"

"Yes, papa."

"Do you see who is here? What can you be thinking of?"

They turned to Pierre Noellet.

"My daughters are learning water colours with one of our friends from Paris."

The friend, in white curl papers, put up her eyeglass, but did not move. The two girls rose, the elder tall and slender, in a white flannel dress with sailor collar, proud of her chestnut hair, which she had just begun to put up with a comb, and fully assured of the royalty of her young womanhood, since she had seen it mirrored in her father's eyes; the younger thick-set and brusque, with a plait of fair hair hanging down her back.

Madeleine, obedient to her father's wish, smiled and shook hands with Pierre Noellet. "It is kind of you to come," she said to the farmer's wife.

Marthe planted herself squarely in front of Pierre, who had been such a capital bird's-nester in his time, and with a little wink, remarked: "I have seen your goat; what a funny animal it is!"

"Is my friend Marie quite well?" continued the elder girl. "I am hoping to see her one of these days."

"Yes, mademoiselle, very well."

"And la Huasse has a foal; you haven't seen it, have you, Madeleine?"

"Oh! have you got a foal?" said Madeleine, who was greatly interested in horses now that she was allowed to ride with her father.

"What do you call it, Pierre?"

"La Roussette, mademoiselle."

"Is it pretty?"

"Yes."

"I shall come and see it. You'll sell it me, won't you, when it is full grown?"

Something that overcame his timidity caused the farmer's son to lift his head. He threw a rapid glance over the figure of the girl in front of him, as she stood a few paces off in all the pride of her youth and grace.

"It is not for sale," he said.

"What are you saying?" put in Mère Noellet, taken aback by his answer; "if mademoiselle wishes for it——"

"You will use it for hunting, perhaps," said Madeleine, showing her white teeth.

Pierre was not one of the obstinate and touchy sons of La Vendée for nothing. This time he looked the girl straight in the face as he answered:

"Yes, if I wish to."

Every one laughed at his way of answering.

Madame Laubriet opportunely turned to him, and said:

"We have all been extremely pleased, my dear child, to hear that you are to begin studying at Beaupréau; and still more to know of the motive which is urging you to study."

"Yes, of course, the motive—" put in Madeleine, who appeared to have no idea what the motive was, but who was anxious to atone for her former speech. "You will meet our cousin there; did you know that, Pierre?"

"My nephew, the Viscount of Ponthual?" added Madame Laubriet, who had no dislike to reminding people that she was born of one of the noble families of the country.

"Cousin Jules is stupid!" exclaimed Marthe, "and idle as well! You will have no difficulty in getting ahead of him."

Madeleine coloured slightly.

"That child is unbearable to-day," she said, "talking in that random way. Jules is not a very steady worker, it is true, but he has been delicate for a long time. One can hardly put that down to him as a crime."

"And more than that, he is a good boy," continued Madame Laubriet in a conciliatory tone—"too good and too rich. He is, however, two classes above you, so there will be no occasion for you to contend with him."

Then, in a more lively voice, and in a tone of dismissal, she turned and addressed the mother:

"When my husband goes to visit his nephew at the college he will ask to see your son too."

"Most certainly," said Monsieur Laubriet. "My godson and my nephew—two friends of the house."

"You will do him great honour," replied little Mère Noellet.

And, thoroughly satisfied with her visit, she made her obeisance and left the room followed by her son, calmly took repossession of her umbrella, which she had left beside the door, and tucked up her dress again in preparation for the homeward walk.

The next day the whole of the Noellet family might be seen on their way to Beaupréau seated behind la Huasse, who trotted along at her usual brisk pace, the three men on the front seat of the

cart with the collegian's boar-skin trunk, and the women at the back, each having a pointed kerchief tied over her best cap on account of the wind. They were not talking, for they none of them felt very gay at heart. The departure of one of their number for college was to each, for different reasons, more or less of a trouble. It was a strange and unknown experience among the race of labourers, this early separation from a child, who, if it had not been for the college, would have remained under the paternal roof until he was one-and-twenty. For Jacques and Antoinette it also meant the loss of a lively companion. What was worse still, Pierre would return home only at rare intervals, and then but for a brief stay; and when he did return, it would not be as the same boy, but as a changed youth, who would have grown different to those left behind. The family were deeply affected at this parting from Pierre. Julien, the father, sat silently ruminating as he held the reins; now and again when they reached the higher ground he would turn round to ask the women if their feet were cold. The mother, catching sight of a vehicle following them at some distance along the road, and evidently bearing a student to the same destination, would address her son in as cheerful a tone as possible, in order to keep up his spirits and accustom him to the coming change.

"Look, my boy, here is some one from our neighbourhood—a boy from Landermont this time. You see you will not be alone."

It was not long before they came in sight of Beaupréau, which is crowded by the woods of the

estate of the Civrac family, and began to descend the hill leading to the lower town, where the college stands beside the river Evre. The farmer put up his cart at the little inn, where there was as much bustle going on, owing to the return of the students, as if it had been a market day. Then for the next few hours it was nothing but a regular procession backward and forward from one part of the little town to the other, broken by long-standing pauses, for there were friends to call on, and shopping to do, and men to be engaged who were wanted for some work or other at La Genivière.

Everywhere it was the same greeting: "Ah, there you are, Maître Noellet, and that's your boy, is it? How he has grown! Well, he will have to be steady now!"

Pierre followed with lagging feet, looking vacantly about and wrapped in thought, while his brother kept close to him, holding his hand as if he could never let him go.

Now and again the girls at work at the back of a shop, who almost considered themselves young ladies of the town, would look up, and seeing the fine, strong figure of the boy, would bend their heads down again, laughing among themselves, as much as to say, "He is a fool to go and shut himself up!"

It was the first thought that came to Pierre when he passed the porter's lodge into the entrance court. The little seminary at Beaupréau was not then repaired and whitewashed, as it is now. The side facing the road, with its high, dark walls, was

peculiarly discouraging, and had the appearance of a barrack.

The Noellets defiled in procession across the outer and inner court, and found themselves eventually in front of the chief façade, and on the terrace which overlooks the playgrounds and the fields beside the Evre. Here were gathered family groups, pupils and parents, arrived from all parts of military La Vendée. Several had been standing for hours in the same place, stationed round the same orange-tub, chattering together as if they were at a fair, and with the naïve ease o behaviour of people who feel at home anywhere between the Sévre and the Loire. The head of the college went from one to the other, obliged to make himself agreeable to each in turn, and valiantly performing his enforced service, although worn out with the lavish distribution of his smiles and assurances. He came up to the Noellets, and, after exchanging a few words with them, turned to Pierre.

"Carry your box into the dormitory of the juniors. You know where it is?"

"No, sir."

"Well, some one will show you."

Pierre and Jacques lifted the trunk and ran off with it. On arriving at the foot of a stone staircase, where students of all ages were hurrying up and down with a deafening clatter of feet, they asked their way to the dormitory. They were answered with peals of laughter. Feeling somewhat put out, they mounted to the first landing and went along the passage. Suddenly a student

rushed out upon them from one of the window recesses.

"*Sapristi,*" he exclaimed, "how you frightened me! I was lighting a cigarette. What is your name—you, the big one?"

"Pierre Noellet."

"And I am Arsène Loubret. But where are you taking that box? These are the masters' rooms."

The youth who was addressing them was low of stature, and his broad, short face was covered with freckles. There was a look of dissipation in the round, quick, inquisitive eyes. Good-natured he certainly was, since he did not hesitate to extinguish his cigarette and put it in his pocket while he led the two boys to the dormitory they were seeking.

"Forty-seven; this is your number."

Jacques gave a scared look round the large whitewashed room, at the iron bedsteads standing in rows, and at the two cast-iron basins surmounted with taps in the shape of swan-bills; his astonishment seemed quickly to give way to a feeling of discomfort. All those people in one room! What would become of his brother in such a place? He made haste to get out of the house, and, once outside, breathed heavily for a few minutes, as if he had been stifled in that upstairs-room.

The two brothers rejoined the rest of their party on the terrace. But during their short absence, which had been felt as the beginning of the final separation, the faces of the family had grown

longer. His mother, who had borne up bravely till then, was now red about the eyes. She threw her arms round her son's neck and held him in a long embrace, as if she would leave behind a store of kisses and love to support the young life that was to be for the first time withdrawn from her protection. Marie, more mistress of herself, and more conscious of the presence of lookers-on, although her absence of colour and abrupt nervous manner of speaking betrayed her emotion, gave Pierre a rapid kiss "*Au revoir*," she said. "The new year will soon come round, and I shall make a pie in honour of your arrival." Antoinette made no attempt at hiding her weeping, while the father, anxious to conceal his feelings, walked off every minute or so to examine the sky, over which some heavy clouds were gathering. He seized his son's hand in his own horny one, and with some abruptness, "Go, my boy," he said, "and be an honour to us." Last of all Jacques came up, and clasping his brother round the waist looked up into his face, lifting his red head and murmuring, "Pierre! my Pierre!" The one word expressed everything: all his past affection, his present sorrow, and the joy it would be to see him again. The elder could with difficulty disengage himself. At last he escaped and ran off, looking back to throw a smile to those belonging to him, and in four strides had reached the bottom of the twenty steps that lead to the court.

But Jacques had followed him, and seating himself on the parapet of the terrace, began calling, "Pierre! Pierre!" and the child, so full of tender

and brotherly affection, was only at last driven away by the shouts of the excited students.

A few minutes later Pierre heard what he thought was the cart from La Genivière passing along the road that skirted the seminary. How often on late evenings, when his father was expected home at the close of some fair-day, had he listened for the sound of la Huasse's hoofs and the particular creak of one of the springs of the cart, he, and his brothers and sisters, amusing themselves with guessing if it was he while still a long way off! He was surprised himself at his own freedom from emotion. He would have been more surprised still, could he have seen the sorrowful faces, and the sadness and anxiety of all those kindly souls who were father, mother, sisters and brother to him, and who were in truth at that moment driving up the shorter road past the college, and above all, had he realized what rich possessions were his at that young stage of life, or guessed that a later day would come when there would be no longer a little sister, no longer a mother with heart full of love for him, no longer a Jacques clinging broken-hearted to the brother who was leaving him.

Pierre Noellet thought of none of these things. He stood alone, leaning against one of the lime-trees of the court, watching the other students near him, who in their turn made this new arrival the object of their attention. Pierre was particularly interested in one fat, chubby-faced youth who was distinguished from his companions, who were for the most part quietly clad in black coats

or jackets, in trousers that were too short for them, and thick walking shoes, by a certain air of distinction about his get up—the tail coat, the white collar with turned-down corners, the polished boots—while his well-nourished appearance and slightly insolent manner denoted a person of wealth. He was some one to be afraid of, it would seem, for he spoke in a loud voice which was evidently habitual with him. For some five minutes he had been the centre of a group of his particular friends, standing taller than all of them by a head, questioning them about the new-comer.

"Noellet?" he inquired of one of them. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure; I heard the master call him by that name a few minutes ago; he comes from Fief-Sauvin."

"It's he, then."

"Do you know him?"

"Not personally; you understand he is only a small farmer-tenant of my Uncle Laubriet. Does he look somewhat of a muff?"

"Well, I must say he does."

"And not very pleased that we should be talking about him. You new young one down there, if you don't like us talking about you come and say so to me."

The blood mounted to Pierre's face. He longed to exchange a blow or two with the impertinent youngster who lied out of sheer vanity in representing his father as a tenant of La Landehue, and the temptation was growing stronger, when Loutrel came up to him. The latter was no fop,

although by no means careless in his attire. Pierre hailed him as a saviour.

"Who is that tall fellow who stands spouting with his hands in his pockets?"

"Jules de Ponthual, one of the seconds."

"I do not like the look of him."

"He's a brute; beware of him when he is throwing a ball."

"Is he strong?"

"Yes, with his hands," answered Loutrel, laughing, and his mean little face grew as puckered as a squashed bladder.

The conversation was cut short, for a bell sounded, and a flock of sparrows, well acquainted with the rules of the seminary, alighted on the lime-trees: the recreation hour was over. The students, ranging themselves in two lines, their voices becoming gradually hushed under the eye of the master, silently passed up the steps of the terrace, and disappeared one by one through the doors of the various class-rooms.

College life had begun again.

CHAPTER V.

PIERRE NOELLET soon grew accustomed to his new surroundings. A few months were required to fill up certain omissions in his previous training, to show him where he was behind his companions, and to teach him what classic models were most in favour with his teacher, but at the end of this time he took the head of his class and remained there. He gained several prizes the first year; the second year he took them all. After that it was an understood thing that Pierre Noellet of Fief-Sauvin was above the usual level, and that no one had any chance of competing with him. Quick of intelligence, and at the same time patient, Pierre had that further excellent quality of the scholar of being equally developed on all sides. He was first in mathematics and in French prose, first in Latin verse and in Greek exercise. Endless rounds of applause greeted him on the day the prizes were distributed, his name being called fifteen times, while little Mère Noellet sat in a corner covered with confusion, conspicuous by the laurel wreaths that lay heaped upon her lap. If the bishop or any other person of distinction came to visit the college, it was Pierre who was chosen for the complimentary address.

Other honours of a still higher class and more flattering still awaited him at the "Academies"—

literary meetings to which only the most advanced students of the higher classes were invited, and at which each of these in turn read an original composition in prose or verse. On these occasions a stage was mounted in the large reception room made to represent a modern drawing-room, with a bust of Moses, recognizable by his flowing beard, to the right, and one of David, with his harp at his breast, on the left. The orchestra was seated at the back, while in front were the five elected orators, their rolled manuscripts in their hands—one philosopher, two rhetoricians, and two tall boys from the seconds—looking somewhat awkward and frightened, but with eyes whose expression of unsullied youth spoke much for the excellence of the race, and for the surroundings amidst which they were brought up. When the headmaster arose and gave out the name "Monsieur Pierre Noellet of Fief-Sauvin, of the Seconds," a flattering murmur ran through the audience. The reading finished, the band struck up some ancient air, while the son of the farmer of La Genivière sat down amidst applause, and as he saw all those extended hands, all those eyes turned toward him with looks of admiration or envy, he felt himself king of that little world, the unquestioned victor in that first contest with those of his own rank and those above him. He had no means of comparing his triumph with that of others, and therefore exaggerated its importance.

Like the taciturn peasant of the Mauges that he was, he slowly and silently grew intoxicated with his success. The mute processes of thought in

which he indulged led him to the conviction that the intellect was the sole sovereign of the world, capable of securing to its possessor the same high rank everywhere that he held at college.

And he was encouraged in this proud illusion by Arsène Loutrel. The son of a village manufacturer, who did some business also in money-lending, he had been born and brought up among a growing population of middle-class people, and was imbued with all their prejudices, hatreds, distastes, and instincts of flattery. Chance had led him to be the protector of Pierre Noellet on his first arrival, as well as his initiator into his new life. When Pierre had risen to a privileged rank in the estimation of his school-fellows and masters, Loutrel was clever enough to profit by it. He understood how to flatter his friend, to gain his confidence, and to reap the advantage of his unsullied reputation, and thus, though inferior in character, and of far less ability, he gained an incredible ascendancy over a nature in every way superior to his own.

The chief opportunities for conversation were on the days when they went for a walk and a halt was called after a long march at one of the traditional spots of rest—a crossway, a clearing in the wood, a mound that remained from a Roman camp, or under the trees beside the Evre, near a garden that had run wild, surnamed by them "La Mère-au-Buis," on account of the shrubs that for some unknown reason grew here and there about the place. Pierre loved this little corner of country, with the water running at his feet and

curling the water-lily stems, the swinging sails of the windmill to the left, and facing him on the further side of the river the red roof and the spreading vine of the farm of Roche-Baraton, which reminded him of La Genivière.

One day when he and Loutrel were sitting here together, while their companions raced about the slope of the chestnut grove chasing a squirrel of which they had caught sight of the red tail, or amused themselves fishing with some primitive lines to which a bent pin was attached, they began talking about the future.

"I have quite made up my mind what I am going to be," said Loutrel.

"What is that?" asked Pierre.

"An architect."

"Well, it must be a fine thing to build castles and churches and public monuments, and to invent new styles appropriate to the new demands."

"Pooh!" laughed Loutrel; "I am not aiming at anything as high as that, I assure you. New ideas, I leave those to others. Five per cent. on the work, that is the part of the trade that appeals to me. For that price I will build houses of any number of floors, farms, barns, or pig-styes, if any one wants them, with as much pleasure as I would build a palace."

"I always told you, Loutrel, that you had a commonplace mind."

Instead of showing any anger at this remark, Loutrel shrugged his shoulders and replied:

"Practical, you mean; don't let us confound the two. You are for the higher things, I for the

plain realities. I know how to calculate; I don't spend my time dreaming. When I was no higher than that, my father called me into his room one day, and, tapping his pocket, said to me, 'Never forget, little one, that two and two make five.' He understood how to live, did my father."

"That was not what I was taught," said Noellet scornfully. "Where shall you go to learn your profession of architect?"

"To the School of Fine Arts."

"At Paris, I suppose."

"Certainly. I shall go there for three years, taking with me an introduction to an architect and to a professor at the school. I then return to Clisson, and buy Monsieur Lafeuillade's business, which he has almost agreed to make over to me. He makes on an average nineteen thousand francs a year."

"Everything seems to fit in admirably, and I congratulate you on being able to see the way before you so clearly. Do your parents approve of your plans?"

"It is they who have so advised me, and who have decided that I shall go to Paris instead of vegetating in a provincial training-school, and who have cautiously approached Monsieur Lafeuillade on the matter. You have not had the same chances, Noellet; you were obliged to choose a profession for yourself. What made you first think of becoming a priest?"

"Well, how do ideas generally come to people?" answered Pierre somewhat brusquely.

"I don't say it was a bad idea, but why that

profession rather than any other? With your powers there is nothing you might not try for."

Pierre tried to look into his companion's eyes, which were wandering and restless as usual, to make sure that he was not laughing at him, and, seeing that it was not so:

"But what sort of thing," he asked.

"Anything and everything, as I said before. A fellow like you can be whatever he likes—a lawyer, a doctor, journalist, magistrate, or for all I know, a state councillor."

It is to be doubted whether Loutrel had any clear idea of the duties of a state councillor.

Noellet remained silent. He had fallen into a reverie. The farmer had just closed the mill sluice, and he watched the water of the river as it rose to the level of the moss-grown stones of the embankment, washed over them and fell back in cascades, hiding in its fall thousands of little air-filled hollows that shone like mother-of-pearl.

"Fall in, Monsieur Noellet! Monsieur Loutrel, fall in!" cried the voice of the master.

Pierre rose. Then he rushed with impetuosity down the slope, winding in and out among the chestnut-trees. He was full of superb nervous energy, and his foot was accustomed to the steep paths of the hills. It took him no more than a minute to join his division, while Loutrel was left far behind, catching his feet in the roots and stumbling over the stones.

In his heart of hearts he had but a poor opinion of Loutrel. The instinct of the peasant in him could detect the vulgarity of this provincial child

of the town, and the frank and upright soul that he had inherited from his mother warned him against a nature of such precocity and inferior qualities. And yet, every day, dinner was no sooner over than he went to Loutrel to join his side in the game, or, if wet, to walk up and down with him under the gymnasium shed. The truth was that Loutrel was not only full of insinuation and flattery, but among the simple-minded farmers' sons who formed the majority of the students, good fellows all, and somewhat chary of speech, there was not one who possessed such a comparatively large knowledge of the world, not one who could tell such an amusing tale of the scandalous sort rife in large market towns, with which he had been familiar since childhood. He spoke with familiarity of Paris, which he had visited when twelve years old; of Nantes, where he occasionally stayed; of trades, which he had studied with his father; of balls, of politics, of fashions; of a multitude of things of which his listeners had for the most part only a confused idea. They laughed and made fun, these boys who were no more than children, when they heard Loutrel boasting and expounding his theories about the world and about money. They much preferred balls and hoops, or running races on stilts. What did it all matter to them? Did not their own simple, upright hearts supply them with the highest knowledge of life? Was there not a directing voice that left them in no doubt which way they were to go—a voice that they had known in childhood, and which they as truthfully

and undoubtingly obeyed now as then? But Pierre Noellet was not only older than most of the others, he was of a different stamp of nature altogether. His restless spirit found pleasure only in wandering beyond the present moment. The world, the future, the unknown—these had from the outset lured him on. He was unable to resist even the semblance of these things, and he followed those who presented themselves in their name. His intimacy with Loutrel, therefore, although at first sight incomprehensible, was not to be lightly accounted for, since at the bottom of it lay Pierre's flattered vanity and his insatiable curiosity.

His masters began to notice his quick changes of temper. A bad mark or a word of reproof would be followed by days of sulkiness. Nor were they well pleased at the intimacy which had sprung up between him and Loutrel. It was disquieting to them, for they had a fellow feeling for one so richly gifted in nature, and as time went on, they became more and more alarmed at the symptoms which displayed themselves in their pupil. One of them, an old, stout, white-haired professor, who had voluntarily buried himself, his scholarship, and his unusual talents as an orator, in the collegiate life of a teacher, openly spoke of it to Noellet. More than once he led him aside into a sheltered spot of the garden, which was his favourite promenade, and where the sun had but to show its nose to feel warm, and there, in a paternal manner, he reminded the young man that there was something—nay, many things—of

greater value than success, and he led him back, as to a healthy spring, to the thought of the vocation he had chosen as a child. And he grew eloquent as he talked, with the additional authority of one who had practised what he preached. He might with truth have said: "Do as I have done; spend yourself on the little ones, on the poor, who will not be conscious of what you do for them, and will give you no thanks; do not harbour a single ambition, though you may have a right to all: the hidden joy that will result is worth all that glory can bring you."

But Pierre, always extremely polite, and touched to a certain extent by this mark of affection, did not respond with the same openness of heart. He eluded the professor's questions, and made vague promises: but his thoughts and intentions remained unchanged. He continued to be at the same time both reserved and friendly, undeniably clever and insupportably vain, and often melancholy for no cause, or for one which he kept secret in his own heart.

And yet no one could have been more welcome everywhere, more liked by his companions and tutors, more cherished by his own family. The first vehicle to draw up in front of the college gates every half-holiday, before even the hour of freedom had struck, was Jacques' cart, harnessed to la Huasse or Roussette. The mother never failed when she came to market, nor the father when he attended the fairs, to leave their business in order to see and embrace their boy. During the summer months, Monsieur Laubriet, according to

promise, sent for him sometimes into the parlour; this was a great event in Pierre's life. He had always stood somewhat in awe of Monsieur Laubriet, and Madeleine put him completely out of countenance. To him she appeared like a goddess, and he could not understand how Ponthual, who was refined neither in thought nor language, found grace in the sight of a being so far superior to all the rest of humanity. As soon as he was back in the school-yard he began to recall all the clumsy and impolite things he had said or done, blushing, and for long after unhappy, at the remembrance of them, and even torturing himself to the point of dreaming about them at night.

Monsieur Laubriet's visits necessarily became less frequent after his nephew had left college. The last he paid was during the mid-day recreation hour, toward the end of November. Jules de Ponthual had then been gone more than a year. Pierre was beginning to study philosophy. He had not seen anything of Monsieur Laubriet during the vacation, as the latter had only returned to Landehue in October, and was on his way to Paris through Beaupréau, when he suddenly thought of his godson.

Just as Monsieur Laubriet, with his wife and daughters, opened the door of the vestibule and came on to the terrace Pierre was playing at ball at the further end of the outer court. He was playing with all the vigour and energy that he loved to employ at certain times, covered with dust, bareheaded, his forehead bathed in sweat. The late autumnal sun shone palely down from

between the clouds, and a few chaffinches, anxious to warm themselves in its declining rays, perched themselves, in spite of the noise, on the topmost branches of the limes, where caterpillars had already replaced the fallen leaves with their cocoons.

All of a sudden the parasols of the ladies Laubriet appeared above the low terrace wall.

"Noellet!" called twenty voices all at once. "Noellet!—you are wanted in the parlour."

Pierre came to a dead standstill. Recognizing the party from Landehue, he was for a moment so overcome with confusion that he longed to run and hide himself. Another moment, and his mind was made up; he retied his cravat, brushed the dust off his coat, pushed back the long hair that was clinging to his forehead, and ran toward the stairs.

Was it a sense of freedom due to Ponthual being no longer there, or the self-assurance that had come with years? Was it the sudden courage that comes to the timid when they find themselves caught in a trap? He clasped Monsieur Laubriet's hand, and said what he had never been known to say before, and that without stammering:

"Good-day, godfather."

Monsieur Laubriet appeared delighted. He gazed with surprise and admiration at the young collegian as if he had never seen him before and replied:

"Well, to think this is Pierre! It's an age since I saw you last, godson."

"Not since Easter."

"And you are now half-way toward being a

bachelor of arts, and already an accomplished philosopher. In a few months' time your studies will be completed, and then the other life, the more serious one, will begin for you."

"In two hundred and fifty-nine days."

"You have counted them?" said Madeleine, laughing.

He ventured to lift his eyes as far as the bottom of the dress of this elegant Parisian lady, and answered:

"Yes, mademoiselle, I count them because I am afraid of them."

"How?" she asked. "Are you afraid of the future?"

"I understand exactly what he means," broke in Marthe, "the seminary with its grating, its bell, its discipline—above all, the discipline—would drive me out of my mind with terror!"

"Marthe!" exclaimed Madame Laubriet, who was always flurried by her younger daughter's impetuous sallies. "Pierre can have no feeling of that kind. Am I not right, Pierre?"

"Of course," the young man hastened to rejoin; "I like being here, that is all."

They continued to talk as they walked up and down the terrace. Pierre felt much more at his ease than usual. Monsieur Laubriet was in a good temper at the thought of returning to Paris. And so the conversation was more animated, and lasted longer, than on former occasions. Madeleine took no part in it. The visits to the college were not exactly what she looked upon as a pleasure, and so she contented herself with walk-

ing behind her parents and crunching the gravel under her short steps, with looking at the things around her, listening in an absent-minded manner to what was being said, and with occasionally exchanging a word or look with her sister which set them both laughing. Notwithstanding this, however, as Pierre, after saying good-by to the family, was going down the first steps of the flight leading to the court, he heard Madeleine, in her clear, somewhat haughty, voice, say to her father:

"He has really very much improved."

And it was true, for Pierre's features had grown refined from the continual mental work which always leaves its impress on the face; they had lost some of their original harshness. Small delicate curls of hair were beginning to show on the cheeks and at the corners of the mouth. The face had a look of energy upon it; the eyes were a little melancholy, the smile charming.

On returning to the class-room that day Pierre felt that work was impossible to him.

With his elbows on his desk, his head between his hands, he sat for long gazing down at the book before him without reading a word, full of delightful emotion as he thought over the six flattering words which had fallen from Madeleine's lips.

CHAPTER VI.

AND at La Genivière also they were counting the days. To-morrow would be a whole holiday. How pleasant it was that winter night, to be sitting up beside the fire. Outside there was a slight frost. Within, around the hearth, on which a fagot of wood covered at one end with a crust of white quivering ash which at moments was scattered by the winds was burning slowly, the Noellets were seated in a semicircle. The father was busy plaiting straw mats ready for the bread when put to rise. He leaned forward in his chair, rolling a twisted fringe of straw which was to form the foundation, and tied the rings of this spiral to one another with a green thong of some kind. Was it rush, or reed, or willow? None of these, but a bramble stem cut into four. It was Jacques who had been to gather the long branches from the hedges, and now they lay on the ground behind his chair, twining round one another, and looking like snakes. He took them up one by one, split them with his knife, and handed them to his father. Both were absorbed in their work, which was ill suited to their hard, stiff fingers.

Beside them, all bending forward toward the fire, were the four women with their white caps, which had little to distinguish them one from another—four white-capped women who hardly

spoke at all, and who worked on as steadily as they could. First there was the mother, who had grown rather thin and shrivelled; next to her the eldest girl, Marie, darker, taller, and severer of countenance; then Antoinette, fair and rosy, wide awake and alert; and last of all, seated at the farther corner of the hearth, Mélie Rainette, who had come to spend the evening at La Genivière. For some time she had been a frequent visitor. Had she changed, then? Had she grown fast and pleasure-loving, like so many girls who spend their time going from one farm to another, gossiping, dancing, and flirting? Hardly, for look at them all as they sat there. Each held a ball of thread on her lap, and a fine steel crochet hook in one hand, while the other held a flat, white, open-work rose, which grew in size more or less quickly according to the age and skill of the worker. Mélie had the cleverest fingers, of course. She had taught the others the design, and how to work it. The thin pricked fingers of her wrinkled workwoman's hand twisted the thread with a quick, sure movement. Antoinette and Marie got along as fast as they were able, but it was evident they were not accustomed to that kind of work. The farmers' wives and daughters of Vendée do not make lace crochet work. Why, and for whom, therefore, were all these women working? They hardly allowed themselves a moment even for speech. Only now and again they lifted their eyes and exchanged a glance, and one could see, as they bent their heads again, that they had a thought in common; their smiles were of the kind

that rise from deeper thoughts and linger a while upon the lips, like a flower that has its roots beneath the water. The truth was that they had all the same secret, and were all preparing the same surprise. Would you believe that there were already fifty roses in the cupboard? Possibly five hundred might be wanted. But before another two years were over everything would be finished, sewn, and ready to be delivered. What a beautiful alb it would be! Soft and white as snow. Would he be pleased when he received it from their hands? They themselves would, indeed, be happy when the day should come to present it to him, and they should see him mount the steps of the altar in his deacon's robe, clad in their alb of white roses. And who should this be but Pierre, the eldest son of La Genivière. So handsome, so clever. All the hopes of the family centred in him. Eyes grew misty with the very thought even of what was coming. Dear child! how fondly he was loved, and how carefully his place was kept for him. That evening there were more than the usual number of smiles and looks of intelligence between the women, for to-morrow he would be with them. They had been living on the thought of seeing him again for the last month, and anticipated joy, as we know, is at least as good as the joy when it comes. Laugh, then, Antoinette, and you, Jacques, and you, Marie; laugh, aged mother—you who shared your youth with your beautiful children, and lost it in theirs. Be proud!—to-morrow you will have your son Pierre with you for a whole day, as in the time gone by.

The father, also, as he sat twisting his straw, was thinking over all these things. And now he stretched his hand over Jacques' knees to where his wife was sitting, and took up the rose she was finishing. He weighed the work, delicate as a spider's web, in his heavy hand, and even tried to pass a finger through the larger holes in it, but, finding this impossible, he gave an admiring shrug of his shoulders.

"It's fine enough, at any rate!" he said.

A chorus of pleased murmurs from under the white caps greeted his remarks, but neither of the women left off working, and the wonderful alb continued to grow in size amid the dreamful silence of the evening hours.

CHAPTER VII.

THEY had had good reason for their rejoicing. Pierre proved himself the gayest and pleasantest of companions from the early morning hour when he arrived. It was one of his good days, there was no doubt about that. His mother found him, if anything, even more affectionate than usual, and when he came up to her and kissed her, for no apparent reason, at the close of the mid-day meal, she threw her arms round her tall and twenty-year-old son, saying:

"My Noellet, you are as much of a coax to-day as when you were a child. What has happened to you?"

His two sisters, in their Sunday attire, had accompanied their handsome brother into the town, proud of his broad, farmer-like shoulders and gentlemanly get up, or at least what they considered such, for he was dressed in his best long holiday coat, and wore a silver watch chain, left him by an old uncle at Montrevault. What a running from door to door! What a clacking of wooden shoes over the frozen ground! What a shaking of hands and greetings! What a chattering of tongues on every side!

It was a most enjoyable morning. It was a pity that during the afternoon the snow began to fall —at first only in a few scattered flakes, which

seemed to hesitate before choosing on what spot of earth to alight, then in heavier and more hurried masses, which were hurled together, and again scattered in white sheaves by the wind, that blew a perfect hurricane, one hardly knew from which quarter, and lashed against the trees and banks and roofs, where it silently collected into heaps. And so for many hours the snow continued to fall. Evening came on, and all the family were again indoors. Marie had taken off her Sunday clothes, and could be heard at work in the adjoining room, where she was folding up the linen. Pierre was playing cards with Antoinette at the corner of the cherry-wood table. His cheerfulness had left him, and Antoinette could see that he took no pleasure in the game. As she was only fifteen, her hours did not number any gloomy ones among them, and he roused himself now and then to respond as gayly as possible to his sister's talk, but it was evidently an effort, and he soon relapsed into gloomy silence. Antoinette, at first only surprised at her brother, gradually became concerned, not understanding how any one could feel dull when with her, even during a snow-storm. She rose as they finished the game, and taking her brother's hand gently between her own, and looking into his eyes with her honest ones:

"You are in trouble about something," she said.

"What makes you think so, little sister? What have I done the whole morning but laugh with you?"

"Then why are you so sad now?"

"It is such shocking weather."

"You know well enough it is not that, Pierre."

He drew her to him and kissed her white forehead. "You foolish little dear," he said. "One can hide nothing from you. I am thinking of what is going to happen at the end of this year. Suppose I did not get my bachelor's degree?"

"Well, in the first place, you are sure to get it. And what is the next great trouble, Monsieur l'Abbé?"

"Don't call me that, Antoinette; it is absurd."

"And why?"

"Simply because I am not an abbé, and that I consider it ridiculous to give people titles that are not theirs."

She unclasped her arms, and looked at him with a little pout on her face, and in the corner of her eye there was something very like a tear, which she with difficulty kept from falling.

"You are not kind and nice this evening."

At that moment Jacques' head appeared at the window.

"La Roussette is harnessed, Pierre," he called from outside, in a musical voice that set the window-pane quivering.

An instant after the father was heard calling out to Jacques to go and take off his things.

"I am going to drive," he added; "the roads are too bad for you."

At these words, which were the signal for departure, Pierre's mother and sisters quickly gathered round him to say good-by.

"*Bon soir*, my Noellet. *Au revoir*. You will be sure to write to us." They kissed him one after

the other, and looked at him with eyes that seemed to long to fix his image upon them ere they drew them away. He, on his side, quickly disengaged himself from them, and went toward the door; but before crossing the threshold he turned, and going up to his mother, took her again in his arms, holding her in so close an embrace that he frightened her. She followed him out with anxious eyes. The girls walked beside the cart for a few yards, then went back to the house, while the two men continued their way to Beaupréau.

The snow had ceased to fall, but it lay on all around—on the road that stretched thin and white before them, on the furrows, the grass meadows, the glebe pastures—looking all alike under their spotless covering; it climbed the slopes, it rose in dome-like heaps on the tops of the gates, and on the bramble leaves, of which it took the form; wherever the eye turned it lost itself in the thick, downy whiteness. The ground shone as if irradiated by some half melancholy light, and one might have thought that the earth was the luminary of the sky—a sky of pearly gray, of nearly the same soft hue all over, but encircled, by a livid rim above the horizon where the sun was setting. The trees stood out against it like pencil strokes on a dull background. The little birds, their heads under their wing, were asleep in flocks on the outer branches of the trees; from afar they could be seen like black dots scattered round the trunks of the young elms. Not one could be seen flying, not one heard singing;

only a few crows hovered somewhere over their timid prey. There was no other sign of life about the fields as far as the eye could reach. Even the sound of the wheels and of the horse's hoofs was deadened by the thick carpet beneath. The air itself seemed dead, and could be scarcely felt upon the face. It was hardly even cold.

La Roussette carried the cart and the travellers along at a good pace. The latter spoke but little, the father occupied with holding in the mare, the son sitting forward plunged in thought, with an absent look in the eyes. As they were climbing one of the hills, however, Julien, leaning forward and lifting up the old coat thrown over his knees, said:

"Are you cold, little one?"

"No, father."

"You look so pale. Pull the cover over you. I am warm enough without it."

And they fell again into silence, while La Roussette still trotted along at full speed on her slender legs, which awoke no echo as she covered the ground.

It was no cold that drove the colour from Pierre's face, but an emotion which grew every moment more unbearable as they drew nearer the town. And now they had reached the first outlying houses. Looking out inquisitively from the window there could be seen the heads of children, to whom the snow and the passers-by were a source of much amusement, and of worthy people who congratulated themselves on being within the shelter of their walls. Pierre Noellet nodded to

no one. The cart drew up in front of the college gate—the father got down to stretch and warm himself and walked half-way across the entrance court. He did this every time he came. Then standing still in the middle of the swept path, which made great notches in the snow:

"Well, my boy," he said, holding out his wide open hand to his son, "I shall not bring you back here many more times. It will be a long drive to your new house next year."

He referred to the large seminary at Angers. But Pierre, who had not let go his hand, drew his father toward him, and letting his head fall on his shoulder, said in a low, stifled voice:

"I am not going to be a priest."

Then he rushed along the path, and disappeared within the college gates.

The farmer was struck motionless by the blow. His whole body trembled. Could it be possible? Had he heard his son rightly? "I am not going to be a priest." Surely Pierre could not have uttered these words. But where was he? Gone, fled like a culprit. And then his silence while they were driving, and still more his pallour. "Are you cold, little one?" And the stifled voice just now. He was ashamed of himself—it was true, then.

"Oh, Pierre! Pierre!"

Still he stood there motionless, his eyes fixed on the door through which Pierre had disappeared, the life-long peace of soul of this fifty-year old peasant so troubled that he was unconscious of the half-dozen students who had come up to him, and were looking at him with curiosity.

The snow began to fall again, and to sprinkle his rough coat. A professor who was crossing the court paused to speak to him.

"Are you waiting for some one, Maître Noellet?"

The sight of this priest's cassock produced such a strange impression upon Julien Noellet that the sobs rose in his throat, and he was unable to reply, and he turned away, hardly knowing what he was doing, following the instinct of pride that drives the wild animal to hide itself when wounded.

"Hue! Hue!" he called to La Roussette, almost before he had mounted into the cart; and La Roussette darted off like a flash of lightning, while those who knew the farmer of La Genivière were astonished to see him put the mare to a gallop up the rough, steep road. He continued to drive at the same break-neck pace round corners, uphill and downhill, not slacking for a single moment. Leaning forward, his hat drawn low over his brows, he let the mare go her own way, taking no care to avoid ditches, or the few vehicles that had got stuck along the road. The reins hung loose. The snow whirled round him, but he did not even trouble to cover himself with the cloak that lay at the bottom of the cart. "I am not going to be a priest, I am not going to be a priest!" He could think of nothing but that; he heard nothing but that. So many ruined hopes lay in those few words! So many recollections came back to him of Pierre as a child, things he had not forgotten which had augured well for the little son! And then the struggle, the hesitation, before allowing him to learn Latin, and the heavy sums

of money that had gone for his keeping alone! All that to be wasted! And then the shame of it, for all the country knew for what profession he had been training. Poor Noellet!—he had never carried such a heavy weight at his heart before.

And La Roussette was still galloping, galloping over the thick snow.

Not till he had driven into the courtyard of the farm did he draw rein, and there he left his sweating animal with the icy snow falling upon it, and abruptly opening the door of the room where in quiet and shelter the family were awaiting him in the warm nest that he loved so well, he walked to his accustomed place at the corner of the hearth, and for more than an hour sat there and wept without speaking.

The children, in pained astonishment, retired one by one, their hearts ready to break at seeing their father in tears.

His wife remained with him, and endeavoured timidly to find out the cause of his trouble, but he only answered her with a look which made her understand that he wished to keep it to himself. She trusted that it was only a passing distress, and that a night would suffice to heal a trouble that had come upon him so suddenly. But the blow that had fallen on him had struck to the very roots of his happiness, and he continued to grieve. It had always been his custom, after dinner or supper, to remain seated at the table, looking round on his children, full of a quiet and tender joy as his eyes fell on them one by one. But now, the meal was hardly finished, before he rose

under the pretext that he was busy in the barn or in the cow-sheds, and he would escape from the house, while his wife, in her ignorance, would say sometimes:

"If only Pierre were here, he would soon cheer him up."

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER some time had elapsed, however, Julien Noellet, unable to bear his secret unhappiness any longer, and at the same time anxious to take the advice of some wise person before he withdrew his son from the college—for of what use was it to keep him there now? It would be better surely to let him take his place again behind the plough—determined to go and consult with Abbé Heurtebise.

One evening in spring, after dark—for he was afraid of being recognized—he made his way to the presbytery. For some little while past he had been growing more timid of his fellow-creatures, imagining that he read on their faces thoughts of which they had no suspicion. So instead of taking the high road, he went along the footpath that skirted Mélie Rainette's garden, walking with his slow measured tread, that was not unlike that of his oxen. Sweet scents arose from the farther side of the brook; the buds, beginning to swell, looked like small dark fruits on the branches. There was a shy beginning of spring. Noellet had no senses for it, but Mélie Rainette, being younger, heard within her heart the song of this renewal of life. She had been busy all day washing, and was at this moment gathering up the linen spread out upon the hedge—shirts, table-napkins, caps—

which she piled up on her left arm till they foamed over like a white nosegay. She heard the farmer passing along the path beneath, and, recognizing his step, she paused in her work, and called out over the hedge:

"Good-evening. Where are you going at this time of day, Maître Noellet?"

In spite of the growing darkness he recognized her, partly by her refined voice and partly by the outline of her face and figure, which he could still discern in the lingering light.

"One has business at all hours," he answered sententiously. "How are you, Mélie?"

"As happy as a chaffinch," she replied, "on account of the fine weather I have had for my washing. There are days when I feel it is a pleasure to live."

"So much the better for you, but everybody does not feel as you do."

The farmer hurried forward, and was soon at Villeneuve.

The abbé took him into his field, and for an hour they walked up and down in front of the beehives which were so dear to that austere man. Neither of the two was a great talker. Their conversation consisted in the interchange of a few serious words, broken by long pauses which served as commentaries on what had already been said, or as preparation for the next sentence. Nevertheless they had no difficulty in understanding one another. Each knew the other's thoughts, for they were both men of Vendée, more given to reflection than to speech.

"It is a serious matter," was the substance of what the abbé said. "I feared for your boy Pierre when he was only a child on account of his pride—later on I even asked myself—but we shall see. Believe me, it is better not to take him from college. Leave him alone for six months; six months may make a great difference in a man. I still have some hopes. At any rate, remember that he can never again be put to the plough. Those who have lived among books, my poor Noellet, are never content to return to farm life."

A few more words and the interview came to an end.

"Your two sons were born the same year, were they not?" asked the abbé.

"Yes."

"And they drew bad numbers for the conscription?"

"Yes."

"When are they going before the board of examination?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"Pierre will be chosen for the service."

"As well, perhaps, that it should be so."

"And if he does not go to the seminary, it will exempt Jacques."

"That will be some slight consolation to me, Monsieur le Curé."

And so, with the darkness of night surrounding them, they parted.

Unfortunately, things did not turn out as the master of La Genivière had hoped. There was no doubt as to Pierre's robustness, but the close work

during his five years of college life, and the strain it had entailed on his eyes—accustomed as a peasant to the reposeful contemplation of the clear country landscape—had weakened his sight. He was invalided by the board of examination then sitting at Beaupréau, while Jacques, though a puny youth, was declared fit for service.

It was a terrible blow for his family. The farm would now lose both its sons that autumn. As far as Pierre was concerned, this had been an accepted fact for long past; but here was Jacques going to be a soldier, he who was so unfitted to become one; he who had greater need than others of care and tenderness and of liberty, if he were to live. Poor Mère Noellet wept often at the thought of what was coming; there seemed nothing for her but trouble. A feeling of dull irritation toward Pierre had taken possession of the farmer, who considered that he was responsible for his younger brother being forced to leave them. He went through the same argument with himself over and over again. "It is his fault; if he had remained at La Genivière he would have preserved his fine Noellet eyesight, and would now have been able to exempt Jacques from service. It is he who is sending Jacques away." He kept his anger to himself, however, and gave no outward sign of it. On the rare occasions when Pierre was at home, there was a certain stiffness between father and son, but they came to no explanation with each other. "Leave him alone for six months," had been Abbé Heurtebise's advice. And so the farmer waited till the end of the

year, with the same peasant-bred patience with which he waited for the right hour for hay-making, for gathering the harvest, or for the vintage.

During the course of the summer, as he knew, Pierre would either become more confirmed in his resolution, or it would pass away like a dream. He would keep silence, therefore, till it was over, while, mingled with his anger and anxiety, there was still a lingering hope. "Supposing his old idea returns," he thought to himself, "I should still have to part with both of them, but it would no longer be the same trouble to me." He was accustomed to long periods of hopeful expectancy. Moreover, when he talked with his wife about Jacques they both cried; when they talked of Pierre her face would brighten, and she would smile with the same perfect confidence as heretofore, no doubt having entered to disturb her mind, and even he would feel some slight softening of the heart as he recalled the many storms, the hail, and the drought, the ravages of which to his fields had been repaired the following season.

CHAPTER IX.

It was a month since Pierre had left the college. The rain had fallen during the night, and the earth, which had drunk thirstily of it after the long dry spell of weather, lay soft and swollen with moisture. On all sides around Fief-Sauvin the early ploughing had begun. Across the hills came, sung or whistled, the long-drawn-out cry of the ploughman to his beasts, "*Ohê, les valets, ohê!*" It was almost noon. Jacques and his father were returning to the farm. Before them, walking in procession, La Huasse at their head, were the cart-horses, followed by six large oxen with silky coats that rose in folds across their shoulders with each step they took. They were dragging a plough after them, its teeth, still clogged with earth, turned upward, as it jolted over the grassy knolls along the road.

As they came in sight of the house, the farmer asked:

"Do you know where he is? It is not a usual thing for him to go off with La Roussette on ploughing day without my leave."

He spoke with anger and frowning brows, for it was the first time that a son of La Genivière had taken such a liberty.

Jacques turned his head toward the hedge that

his father might not notice his confusion, and answered indifferently:

"I am sure I do not know."

But he was not speaking the truth.

On rising that morning at dawn, he had found Pierre in the stable currying La Roussette, who was standing still with her head buried in a troughful of oats. The bridle with its red rosettes was hanging on a post near.

"Where are you off to?" asked Jacques.

"To the forest. They are hunting there to-day."

"To the forest! And you are going to take La Roussette? Father will not be pleased, for he wants her to-day for the ploughing of the large Musse."

"Harness La Huasse in her place, Jacques," replied Pierre, tapping his brother on the shoulder. "I shall not be here long, and I want to satisfy a whim of mine that has been tempting me for ten years."

And before he had finished speaking, he had thrown a cloth in place of a saddle over the back of La Roussette, put on the girth, mounted, and without stirrup, and only a piece of bread in his pocket, started off for the forest of Leppo.

There was nothing extraordinary in this, there in bold Vendée, with its sense of equality. Those who have hunted in the forests of Vezins, of Leppo, or of La Foucaudière, know how often, as the hunt begins, either at the cross-roads or on the heaths, may be met many country youths in blouses or shirt jackets mounted on farm horses, who cut across in front of carriages and of pink-

coated huntsmen. The grandfathers of these farmers' sons were the companions of nobles in the time of the "Great War." They rode with only an old bridle, or even a piece of rope, side by side with officers wearing their white scarves, and they shared with these the same life, and often died the same death. From such intimacy spring rights and traditions. The huntsmen know this, and the farmers' sons know it better still. What was unusual was to meet such a horse as La Roussette.

She would not follow directly behind the hounds, but some hundred yards to the left, obstinately continuing in this parallel direction, and always at the same long trot, never breaking into a gallop. La Roussette and her rider had disappeared for an hour, trying to recover a lost scent. They suddenly reappeared in the middle of a clearing just as the buck, which had been started again, was running straight for the outskirts of the Leppo forest with the intention of making his way from there to that of La Foucaudière. Most of the huntsmen were soon scattered, their horses being foundered or out-distanced. Two only kept in sight of the hounds, the whipper-in Leproux, a stout man on a lean mare, with a heart-shaped mouth and swollen cheeks, ready to sound his horn, and Madeleine Laubriet, the most attractive and most inveterate of huntresses. She was ravishing in her short habit, with her brown hair twisted in a knot under her little silk hat, with her look of animation and her pink cheeks, and entirely given up to the delight of the chase.

And what greater delight is there than galloping at full speed with the wind lashing against one's face, and feeling oneself borne along by an intelligent and obedient power that requires only the pressure of a finger to change its pace or its course! A flood of sensations, the pride of mastery, the intoxication of space, a kind of voluptuous pleasure in danger, the primitive passion of the blood, that old ferocity which ordinarily we keep in check—overflow our being. And how delicious it is to draw the air into one's lungs! And how the hunting train of Landehue went sweeping by! It was a vision passing before one's eyes, a chorus of voices flying past. The whole forest was alive. Madeleine Laubriet royally enjoyed herself. She was a huntress by birth. The old Leproux, who doted upon her, sounded many extra *bien aller* for her sake, and the sonorous notes of his horn were heard afar through the moist woods, awakening terror afresh in the heart of the deer—poor frightened beast!—that risked a last effort to save his life, and made for the open plain.

"He'll soon be at his last gasp, won't he, Leproux?" she asked, as she galloped on.

"Before another twenty minutes are over, at the pace our dogs are keeping him at, Mademoiselle. Look at them; you can hardly see them for the rate they go."

The whole pack in a body were hunting by sight, looking like a moving patch among the furrows and the stubble.

Mademoiselle Laubriet, passionately fond as

she was of the chase, had yet not failed to notice the horseman whose mare always kept at a certain distance ahead of hers, never altering its pace. She had even fancied that he, on his side, had not been unwilling to look at her. At least she gathered as much from a certain respectful retirement in his behaviour, for this strange horseman, whenever he saw her turn her head, leant forward over his horse's mane, and spurred his horse as if to flee from her. And so, after a wild chase that brought them to the first clearings of the Foucaudière, no longer seeing him near, she said to the whipper-in:

"We seem to have lost our companion. Do you know who it was?"

"I recognized the mare, Mademoiselle; it was La Roussette; but who was riding her I cannot say."

Then a moment later, with a knowing look:

"A capital little beast that for drawing a cart."

For old Leproux the honour of the Landehue stables was almost one and the same thing as his own.

Nevertheless, when a quarter of an hour later he put his horn to his lips to sound the "Hallali!" he found himself the second to arrive on the spot, for Pierre Noellet was there before him, his coat torn by the branches, and La Roussette was standing in her favourite attitude, with one hind-foot half lifted, her head down, and a general air about her of being tired out. At his feet were the hounds crowding round the buck, which, at the end of its strength, had dragged itself into the shelter of a

briar bush. The poor animal, its breath exhausted and its blood turned, hardly moved even when he felt the fangs of his pursuers in his flesh; a faint bleat alone cried for pity; the pink tongue hung down; the turned-up eyes were beginning to grow dim.

Mademoiselle Laubriet rode up in her turn, looked at the dying animal without a shadow of emotion disturbing her smile of triumph, re-arranged her habit, patted her mare's neck, and then, looking at Pierre Noellet:

"Bravo, Pierre!" she cried. "As usual, the first in the field."

For the first time she addressed him without that shade of haughtiness in her voice which had so deeply wounded Pierre. He was conscious of it, and it gave him courage to reply:

"Just a chance, Mademoiselle; it is the first time I have followed the hounds, and probably the last."

"Your animal is perfect. Will you sell it to me now," she asked, smiling.

"I would certainly, if it only depended on me."

The conversation would have continued, but a voice suddenly called out:

"Well, now, this is amusing!"

And at the same moment there appeared emerging from one of the forest roads, mounted on a thoroughbred that was badly lamed, an athletic-looking young man in pink coat, blue spotted waistcoat, white trousers fastened below the knees with buckles, and top-boots; his silk hat, perched on the back of his head, was fastened to

his coat collar by a little blue ribbon. He was laughing with all his might, and nodding his head up and down with a rapidity that made his brown moustache dance, and disturbed the white cravat, which was ornamented with the traditional stag's tooth mounted in gold.

"I say, though, isn't it a joke! I never expected to meet little Noellet at a hunt."

Pierre turned red.

"In this country," he said quickly, "the hunt is open to everybody. I, too, as little expected to see you here, Ponthual."

He made a point of addressing him with the familiar *tutoiement*, knowing that it would not be quite to the taste of his old school-fellow.

"I thought you were employed chanting your *oremus*," replied the other.

"Not yet, cousin," put in Mademoiselle Laubriet. "Pierre Noellet has not finished his holidays, and I think he was very wise to come and join the hunt if he wished to. You come in only third, my poor Jules, with a limping horse, and that puts you out."

"What nonsense!"

"It's truth," she said, drawing herself up. "I know you well; you are put out about it."

Half a dozen pink coats now came riding out of an adjoining wood. Leproux dismounted for the quarry, and Noellet, who did not care to prolong the conversation with Jules de Ponthual, nor to stay to see the cutting up of the buck, profited by the occasion to take his departure. He bowed to Mademoiselle Laubriet, turned La Roussette

round, and went off down one of the green forest paths.

The haughty Madeleine had smiled at him; what was more, she had stood up for him. He was surprised and delighted. "Always first in the field!" What did Ponthual's scornful remarks matter after that?

According to the natural course followed by all human reverie, his thoughts reverted quickly to the past, that Divine source from which we begin to draw so early. When he himself and the ladies of Landehue had all been children, he had begun to feel a timid admiration for them—Madeleine particularly, with her queen-like airs, had inspired him with awe. Her least words had seemed to him like sovereign commands. In those days the Laubriet returned to Landehue at the beginning of April. And then what days of birds'-nesting there had been! What days spent in the fields searching for primroses, for daffodils, for wild hyacinths, and for the little ranunculus, the colour of wine-lees, in the melancholy nosegays of which Madame Laubriet took especial pleasure! As soon as Madeleine and Marthe caught sight of Pierre returning from one of his marauding excursions, holding up a fold of his smock-frock in which the booty lay hid, they would break away from their nurses: "What have you got to-day, Pierre—jays, magpies? Magpies are mischievous birds, aren't they? Oh, no, starlings! Oh, what pretty things! Where is the cage we had last year? You ought to know, Pierre?"

He always did know where last year's cage was.

The poor birds were shut up in it. For three days the little girls looked after them with too great assiduity; on the fourth their pensioners began to droop. Toward the end of the week Pierre dug a grave for them under one of the trees. Another pleasure in the hay-making time had been to watch the little pink aprons and wind-blown hair of the children as they flew in and out among the heaps of freshly piled grass. Madeleine was such a capital runner; even then she showed her taste for the chase. Had she not once harnessed Pierre to a wheelbarrow, in which she sat enthroned in a flowered dress, with a whip in her hand tied with riband? "I am Diana; you are the horse; there are the deer, off now at a gallop! Quicker, quicker! At full speed!" And the frightened sheep scattered in every direction about the field, leaping over the hedges, while she sat and laughed her clear, light laugh, like the song of a blackbird. Ah, those times were far away!

When the rider dreams, the horse takes its leisure. La Roussette had insensibly dropped from her trot into an easier pace. The sun was sinking, and the shadows of the bare trees were lying here and there across the road as Pierre entered the courtyard of the farm.

His father was standing upright at the stable door.

"Have you just returned from the hunt?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And since when are the horses taken out without my permission?"

Pierre tried to open the door, but the farmer flung it to with a blow of his fist.

"Since when, I ask you?" he repeated in a voice of thunder.

"I thought," stammered the young man, "that as it was the first time——"

"Quite so, and it will have to be the last, my boy. When I am dead, you can dispose as you like of my property. Until then I am master here; do you understand?"

Then seizing the bridle from his son's hands, he added:

"Give La Roussette to me; gentlemen who go hunting do not look after their horses."

And with a shrug of his shoulders, he went into the stable, pulling the beast after him.

Pierre, angry and humiliated, did not dare resist, nor answer his father aloud. He turned on his heel, muttering, as if speaking to himself: "I see I am one too many here. Have no fear, father; you will have no occasion to repeat what you have said to me."

CHAPTER X.

ON the morrow Pierre Noellet, who had spent the whole day away from the farm with a friend who lived in a neighbouring village, was returning home through Fief-Sauvin. As he passed old Joberie's tavern, which was situated near the church at the top of the hill, he was surprised to hear a considerable noise going on within. At this time of the year, when the early ploughing and the late threshing were going on simultaneously—a time of excessive fatigue for the labourers—it was not unusual, as night fell, for the tavern to be full of drinkers, mostly farm hands white with dust from the threshing-floor. To-day, however, there was an exceptional influx of men. With the reapers were weavers, farmers, and shopkeepers, the latter recognizable among the thin job-hands from their pleased and comfortable appearance. The sudden burst of sound, the cheers, the continual clicking of glasses, drew several of the old people from their quiet homes in the neighbourhood to the tavern door, and these added their smiles as applause, when the men inside, with the full power of their lungs, reiterated the cry of, "To the health of the boy Louis!" "To the 2nd Light Infantry!"

They were celebrating the return of Louis Fauvêpre, the blacksmith's son, who had served

his time, and was just back from Tunis, with a corporal's stripes on his sleeve. The father, once more in possession of his son, had done nothing since the previous evening but parade him up and down the town, never tired of showing him off, still less of gazing at him himself, while he spoke of the Kroumirs as if he had seen them himself, and caught his son up if the latter varied in his recitals. The smithy took a holiday. Just think of having a son safely back after four years of misery—a son who, after the following day, would have no right ever again to put on a uniform! The host went up and down between his cellar and the room that was full to overflowing with his guests, joking and beaming with delight at this second Sunday which the week had brought him.

As to the hero himself, he was a handsome, thin, bronzed young soldier, of masculine countenance, who was as little intoxicated by his ovation as he was by old Joberie's Nantes muscadet. Leaning upright against the wall, between a portrait of MacMahon and a printed notice of the penalty incurred by being seen drunk in public, he shook hands with the newcomers, who at every minute were swelling the number of the drinkers, exchanged good-days with them, touched glasses with friends to right and left, without pausing in the narrative of his campaigns, to which a crowd of youths, seated near him, listened open-mouthed.

"You understand," he said, "it was a ravine between two mountains, with a sun overhead to

melt a cannon, and not a drop of water. There the fight began. All of a sudden, pit, pat, and two of our men fell beside me, and the balls go whistling round us, lifting our hair. It was the Ouled-Ayas shooting from above at us from a plateau of rock, embattled like a fort. The colonel ordered our squadron to dismount. We silently turned to the left round the swell of the hill, and entered the thick of the wood. Then came the order that we were to advance another two hundred yards or so, and then open fire. Ah, if only you had been there, my boys! All our shots told. At the end of another twenty minutes there was not a single white burnoose to be seen on the plateau; nothing but dead—nothing but men, women, and children, and two thousand frightened, bleating sheep."

And all those present, carried away by the thought of his victory at which Fief-Sauvin had figured, cheered loudly at the defeat of the Kroumirs, "Health to young Louis! To the 2nd Light Infantry! To the corporal!"

The light white wine had begun to muddle several of the heads by the time Pierre Noellet reached the tavern.

"Ah, Noellet," cried a voice, "come in!"

Several of the drinkers appeared at the door, repeating the invitation:

"Noellet! Noellet!"

He hesitated a moment, but finally decided to turn back.

His entrance was greeted by a surprised murmur. All eyes turned toward him. But in the

midst of these men, who yet belonged to his own world, he felt himself ill at ease. He was conscious of an atmosphere around him of silent hostility. His face was a little pale as he walked up to Louis Fauvêpre.

"Why, it is Noellet from La Genivière! Little Noellet, whom I knew when he was no higher than that," exclaimed the corporal, grasping his hand.

"Yes, it is he himself," replied Pierre.

"You don't look, my boy, as if you had done much ploughing," continued the corporal. "What are you doing here?"

He had no malicious intention in asking the question, but the old school-fellows whom Pierre had neglected, and who were jealous of him as well as angry at his scornful behaviour, seeing their opportunity for revenge, began laughing and joking in a coarse sort of way. They were at the moment in full force. One of them, impossible to distinguish among the numbers crowding round the tables, was bold enough to call out in reply:

"What is he doing? Nothing. He is a gentleman; salute him, corporal."

A second followed his example, and insulting words, greeted by the majority present with evident satisfaction, began to pour down on Pierre. Taken back at first by this sudden attack, he tried at first to stand out against his assailants. He was standing among the drinkers a few steps off from Fauvêpre, and at each fresh insult hurled at him he turned first to one side and then to another, but it was impossible to catch the culprit, who

hid himself behind the others, and Pierre's rising anger only served to increase the hilarity. Finally, he crossed his arms, and, looking toward the farther end of the room, cried out:

"You are cowards, every one of you; not one dares say anything to my face."

"I will dare it with pleasure, my little dear," answered a voice.

The "little" one addressed was at least five feet three in height, and had the build of a man, but the other man was of colossal stature. A regular giant, a miller's servant, red in hair and face, now crossed the room swinging his enormous shoulders, and came and planted himself in front of Pierre.

"Here I am," he said. "It's with me you have to deal. What's your complaint?"

"Why do you insult me?" asked Noellet.

"Because you treat us with contempt."

"That's it. Bravo, miller! Well spoken!" cried several of the men.

"Because," continued the miller, "you were not born any better than we were, and you ape the gentleman; because we were all together at school, and now you will know none of us."

"Is it my fault that my studies have separated me from you?"

"No; but I consider it your fault that you forget to nod to us down in the town, and are ashamed to drink a glass of wine with us, or to join our company."

"Last Sunday you pretended not to see me," added another of those present.

"Or me either," put in a second.

"Your brother is a ploughman like ourselves," said a third.

"See now," exclaimed Pierre, who was growing more nervous every minute, "you are all jealous of me."

Half of the drinkers rose at this, and, thumping their fists on the table, cried:

"Jealous of what? Turn him out! Jump upon him, miller!"

The miller turned back his cuffs, sneering as he did so; he then brought his two fists close to Pierre's chest.

The latter did not appear in the least disconcerted, but throwing up his head, and looking straight at all the mocking, menacing faces and the raised fists, only cried:

"Jealous of the teaching that places me above you, that is what you are."

A burst of anger greeted this bravado, and the clamour did not soon subside. Even those who had taken no part in the quarrel began to grow angry and protest. Pierre meanwhile, threatened and insulted on all sides, at last understood what he had till then but feebly recognized—that he was an alien among his own people, disowned and driven away by them.

The child had disdained the land, and the land, in its turn, had rejected the man.

He hesitated no longer, but exclaimed proudly:

"Adieu, boys of Fief! It will be long before you see me again."

And forcing a way for himself, he reached the door amid cries and hoots.

In vain Louis Fauvêpre, who was quite in the dark as to the cause of this outbreak of anger, endeavoured to stop him, and to soothe the excitement of these men of Vendée.

"Come back, Noellet! Come back!" he called; "they are only in fun."

But Pierre was already out on the road, on his way to La Genivière.

As he neared the barn, before turning into the courtyard, he caught sight of Jacques busy setting a trap for the blackbirds under a gooseberry tree laden with ripe red fruits.

"Where is father?" he asked, without pausing.

"In the granary turning the grain."

Pierre sprang up the flat runged ladder which served as a staircase. He paused when he reached the top before approaching his father, which was always rather a formidable affair. Moreover, he was so overcome and out of breath that he could not at first have spoken.

The farmer, with a wooden spade in his hand, was at the right-hand end of the granary, digging into an immense pile of the last year's wheat, bringing the underlying grain to the top that it might dry better. He never allowed any one to do this work for him. The streams of red gold, as they poured down the sides of the heap from his spade, with the rustling sound of falling sand, or of coins, were a delight to the old peasant. The grain represented the life and the profit of the year. No doubt, as he turned it over, he recalled the needless fears he had suffered, the storms that had swamped his fields, the droughts that had

burnt them up, the fear-giving days of threshing, and knowing all these troubles past, he smiled at his acquired riches.

Although occupied with his task, and working with his face turned to the end wall, he became quickly aware, by the lessening of the light, that someone was standing between him and the door. He turned and saw his son, who was hesitating to accost him, pausing just within the entrance, dressed, as he hated to see him, in the clothes of the better class. His quiet, sunburnt face grew serious, and, leaning on his spade, he waited, while the white dust he had raised hung all around him, and danced in the rays of the sun.

"Father," said the young man, "I have something I wish to say to you."

"Speak on," replied his father; "we can talk as we like here, for the women are in the town."

"Father, you treated me roughly yesterday when I returned with La Roussette."

"You deserved it, my boy; you were wanting in respect to me."

"What is more, you think that for the last month I have been doing nothing, that as yet I am nothing, and that displeases you; is it not so?"

"Most certainly you cannot continue to live and do nothing here, where everybody has their work."

"They have told me that often enough, those Fief boys, and have insulted me in every possible way."

"When was that?"

"Just now, down at Joberie's; and I can see plainly from what you and they have said to me that I am one too many here."

"Pierre, I never said that!"

"No; but I felt it, and that is enough—I shall go away."

"Where do you intend going?"

"Somewhere a long way off."

"And when?"

"To-morrow."

There was an interval of silence. The moment had come. The question which had been tormenting Julien for months past was now to be answered. And how? The answer, as yet unknown, hung in suspense between them. Would it be joy, pride in a resumed vocation, or the repetition of one already spoken?

Master of himself as was Julien Noellet, his voice was feeble, and trembled as he continued:

"What place, then, are you thinking of?"

"Paris."

"There may be a seminary at Paris—say, my dear son, is it to that you are going?"

"No."

"What then?" asked the father, his face turning white with anguish as he spoke.

"I told you that I could not be a priest; it is useless to speak of it any further."

It was all over, then! The farmer began to shake all over, as on the day when his son's decision had first broken in upon the peace of his soul. To hide his trembling he turned round and began again to dig up the grain in large spadefuls. But

his eyes must have grown dim, for the wheat rolled on to the floor. When at last he paused, he wiped his forehead, stuck his spade into the middle of the heap, and went and leant against the wall at the end, as if the last few minutes' work had exhausted him.

"Pierre," he said, and his voice rang with a poignant sadness, "when you were small, and up to the time you were fifteen, I thought that you were going to be my help, and that you would carry on the farm after my death. The thought gave me joy and peace of heart."

"It was natural that you should think so," replied Pierre.

"Then you told us that you wished to be a priest. I made you wait a year. Then you went to college, and I turned my hopes to Jacques. I did not think they would take him from me to serve. I was mistaken. They did take him. And now you are going from me, and I shall be left at La Genivière alone with farm servants, as if I were a man without sons!"

"It is hard for you, father; but what can I do?"

"No, Pierre, that is not the saddest part of it. Then I said yes to you; I let you finish your training; I did not go back from my word. And you, why have you changed your mind?"

The young man hung his head without answering.

"Yes, a great change has come over you. Why is it? If God wished for you yesterday, why does He no longer wish for you to-day?"

Still Pierre did not speak.

"I have been troubled in mind for a long time now about it. Have I in any way set you a bad example?"

"Oh no!" exclaimed Pierre hastily.

"Have you noticed anything in my speech or manner of over-much regret at not having you for the farm? Ah, dear son, there have been days when it has been so with me, but I know I was wrong. Is that the reason?"

"No, father, it is no fault of yours at all."

"Then it has to do with you. What have you done? Tell me. Your mother shall know nothing of it, I promise you. Tell me, for it is as great a trouble to me to be kept in ignorance of that as to see you go from me."

There was something so touching about the old father in his self-accusation, in his humble confession of a passing weakness, while he had no word of reproach for his son, that Pierre decided to tell him all. But there was no humility in his confession. He raised his head and looked at his father, and the farmer saw the dark red light come into the eyes which he had noticed with anxiety in Pierre as a child when he was angry or obstinate.

"I have not changed," said Pierre, "any more than I shall change. There is no need to accuse yourself or any one else. When I asked you to let me go to college, it was with the desire to raise myself—I had no other distinct aim in view. Of what use is it to dissimulate any longer? When I was ten years old the thought of being a priest no doubt crossed my mind. But in my total

ignorance of the world it meant chiefly to me the getting away from the land. Farm-life did not suit my tastes. I aspired to rise above the surroundings into which I had been born; to gain a position, as others had; to grow happy, rich, and powerful, by help of the intellect that I felt I possessed. When I said to you at fifteen, 'I wish to be a priest,' I took the only means in my power to escape from the conditions of my birth."

The father, still leaning against the wall, did not seem to understand.

"What other way was open to me to get away from here?" continued Pierre. "Would you have let me go if I had proposed to you to be a lawyer, doctor, notary, or any other thing whatsoever? You know you would not; and I knew it also. Ah! the land keeps tight hold on those she has once in her grasp. I was obliged to pretend I felt a vocation that I did not, in order that I might learn Latin, and be taught like the rich people's children, so as to become their equal, since I was born beneath them. I do not regret what I did; I accomplished what I wished, for here I am free!"

"Then you deceived me!" cried the farmer, leaning forward with clenched fists, as if to spring on his son and punish the insolence of his words.

"Do you think it cost me nothing? I needed all the determination that you have transmitted to me with your blood to leave you so long in error. You thought me strange and whimsical; I was only tortured by the lie that stood between us. I saw you indulging in a dream that had been

but an unformed, flitting fancy for me, and one which I knew I must myself some day dispel. I suffered, believe me, in seeing you rejoicing in a false hope, so much so that I had not the courage to carry out my resolution to the end. I ought to have held my tongue for five whole years, instead of which I gave in at the fourth year, telling you that I could never be a priest. You know the rest."

"And you were not ashamed," said the father, whose anger was now rising and threatening, "to deceive us all—me, your mother, your masters, the whole country?"

"I was obliged to."

"You have allowed us to deprive ourselves for five years in order to send you to college, and to pay for your gentleman's clothes and your books. You have stolen three thousand francs of my money."

"Stolen, father?"

"Yes, stolen, for I should never have given them to you if you had not lied to me, and you have had the face to come and tell me this, and to excuse yourself by insulting the land. Wretched boy! Do you realize who it is you scorn? It is I; it is your mother——"

"No, no."

"It is all those from whom you have sprung, and who tilled the land before me. Ah, you are ashamed of us! Ah, you disown La Genivière! Begone from it, then, ungrateful son!"

The peasant had seized his spade again. He was white and trembling with rage.

"Go, I say," he repeated, drawing near to Pierre; "not to-morrow—to-day. It is I who drive you away."

Pierre stood without moving, clenching his teeth, and let the old man come within two paces of him to show he was not afraid.

Then he walked backward toward the door, saying:

"I was right in thinking that you would not understand a man's ambition. I have risen in spite of you, and I shall arrive in spite of you—in spite of you."

At this last affront the farmer flung the spade up over his head.

"Be off with you!" he cried; "be off with you!"

Pierre obeyed, and slowly descended the ladder, disturbed and frightened at the recollection of his own boldness, but not in any degree shaken in mind. His lips moved, and he spoke aloud, continuing the conversation that had been interrupted. There was no one in the court-yard; Pierre crossed it. All the doors were shut. The windows of the house flashed in the sun. Around the pools of liquid manure, scattered with straws that shone like blades of gold, the ducks sat fast asleep, their heads under their wings. Evidently the women-folk had not returned. He turned as he reached the stable, but his father was no longer visible through the granary window. He went quietly in, and seeing a fresh pile of straw for the horses, threw himself upon it face downward like an angry child.

There he could give full vent to his feelings by uttering imprecations to which the only response was the laboured breathing of La Huasse, now old and broken-winded, in front of her empty manger. This state of angry feeling lasted a long time. Finally, however, the solitude began to sober him. Having, as he felt, exhausted his reproaches, he sat up.

At that moment a young voice near him exclaimed:

"My poor Pierre!"

He turned his head.

"My poor Pierre! Are you again in trouble?"

It was Antoinette leaning over him with her pretty face, looking at him with the clear bright eyes of her fifteen years, into which had come an expression of astonishment. What trouble could have so upset her brother? What had he to complain about? She had no idea. But, feeling a joy and tenderness within her sufficient for two, she took hold of her brother's hand very gently and full of self-confidence. Sisters have these maternal ways with them when still very young.

"Come, my Pierre," she said, "and let me comfort you," and Pierre obeyed her call, and together they went to a spot well known to them, and favourable for confidences, behind an immense heap of straw, near the ravine.

There, in readiness for future gates, the father kept his reserve of the cherry trees and elms that had been cut down. Pierre in a few words told her abruptly, almost roughly, the decision he had come to, and how his father had driven him

away. Then almost without a pause, and in self-defence, he began to tell of the future. He did it cleverly, avoiding all reproaches.

"My father has never understood me," he said; "he is not educated. It was natural that it should be so."

The future for Pierre meant only dreams and ambitions—a sort of brilliant rainbow which he took for a pathway. Men, events, time—everything was to serve his aims, and he disposed of them as if they were his own property. Everything had been foreseen, even certain objections: the difficulty, for example, of making a name or of simply finding a place in the literary world. But was not literature the indisputably right vocation for Pierre Noellet with his degree, with his first prize for French lecturing at Beaupréau?

"Yes," he went on, "I shall grow rich, and then I shall be able to help you all. Father will forgive me, and all these fools who were laughing at me down there, you will see how they will take off their hats to me! We shall be happy; you, Antoinette, will be proud of me, and then, you know," he added, turning to her, "I shall perhaps be thought a good match. What do you say to that?"

Poor Antoinette! The more excited Pierre became the more she felt her own spirits failing. What, no abbé! no white alb! Where was the retiring, simple-hearted brother of the old days? She was overcome, and unable to speak. Pierre, growing aware of this, exclaimed:

"Well, Antoinette, are you going to start cry-

ing? I see nothing sad in what I have just been telling you."

She could hold out no longer, and burst into tears.

"Ah, yes, Pierre, it is sad! And I am very unhappy, very!"

And she threw her arms around his neck as if to keep him from running away from La Genivière, and to hold him to the past. Her sisterly affection was all the argument her child's heart could oppose to his confession and plans.

It might have sufficed with another, but Pierre thrust her from him.

"I see," he said, rising, "you do not understand me any better than the others."

And while she kept on repeating amid her tears, "Oh! indeed, I love you, Pierre—I assure you I do understand a little," he went forward a few paces to where the ravine ran along beside the threshing-floor, and, turning under the trees into a path made by the goats, he disappeared.

Antoinette went back toward the house. Pierre, having reached the bottom of the ravine, wandered a while about the meadows of La Genivière; and it was here that the frenzy of pride that had been excited by his father's reproaches, and in part by his sister's distress, began to be mingled with feelings aroused by the thought of his departure. The shadow of the high wall upon which La Genivière was built was thrown far across the valley. The mist, which rose as night came on, by degrees hid the more distant points of the familiar landscape. The thought arose in Pierre that there

were already many things that had disappeared for him, and which he would never see again. He looked around him at the narrowing horizon, at the darkening water, at the rocks which were growing indistinguishable from the bushes that clothed the slope. How often had he sat guarding the cattle by the curved banks of the river, where for hardly a day in the course of the year did the aspens cease quivering in the breeze. How often he and Jacques had sung and whistled and played together there!

Here was the hollow where they sheltered from the sudden storm, and the old chestnut tree with the hut of rushes still to be seen supported by its forked trunk, and beyond, again, the ploughed lands stretching to the summit of the rising ground on the farther side of the ravine. What long, exquisite hours had been spent in this little corner of the world! How they seemed now to call to him from the inanimate objects around, with voices that shook the soul! It is a sweet and a hard lesson that the child teaches to the man who is leaving home, and Pierre was not deaf to it. Other recollections led him on. In the darkness that was now complete he climbed again up to the farm, and crept along beside the stable wall like a thief; then, hearing no sound, the desire seized him to have a last look at the beasts. There they were, standing in a row in front of their mangers, which were filled with maize, only just distinguishable in the faint light that still remained. He recognized them all, notwithstanding, and called them each by name—Vermais,

Fauveau, Chauvin, Rougeais, Caille, and Kobiais. He passed along behind them, and the gentle beasts turned their heads to follow him with their melancholy eyes. La Roussette was also there. He gave her a little slap on her hind-quarters: "Adieu, my Roussette," he called. Farther on he came to the shed with the ploughs and harrows, to the large heap of straw, the barn, and the roosting chickens, which woke up and bent their crests. He walked in and out of the buildings, now wrapped in shadow, as among ruins, led by the old habit, and surprised that he was no longer able to feel indifferent about anything. All these dead and living things, to which he was about to say good-by, held him back with some strange power; and yet it was the least painful of his farewells. On the farther side of the windows, through which shone the warm blaze of the fire, his mother and Jacques and his sisters were sitting together. They all knew of the sorrow that had fallen on La Genivière. They were expecting him. Pierre went up the steps. They all knew his footstep.

When he appeared on the threshold, Marie, who was clearing away the supper that no one had touched, drew back as if seized with terror, and with the air of exclaiming: "See the evil you have wrought!" Then she went and sat down by her mother. But was that indeed his mother, that woman seated in a low chair at the back of the room, bending forward, with her gray hair escaping from her cap, and her face dull and distorted with sorrow! Her eyes, although staring in the

direction of her son, seemed not to see him when he entered. Not a feature of the face usually so mobile now stirred.

Poor Mère Noellet, who till then had been so fond of her child, so happy in giving him to God, whose maternal love had thereby acquired a touch of religious respect, so far had she been from any doubt on the subject of his vocation, which had been the fulfilment of long-cherished dreams. And then all at once to be precipitated from this height, to be struck by a blow for which she was so totally unprepared! Two hours had sufficed to exhaust her tears and the strength and energy of her life. She now sat like one stupefied.

Pierre went up to her.

"Mother!" he said.

But she did not hold out her arms, generally so ready to embrace him at the first word of affection. The hands which had rocked him lay inert in her lap.

"Mother," he said again, as he leant over her. "Why do you sit like that? I assure you that it is far better for me to go—I shall return—I shall be——"

Rich, happy—he could not add these two words. There was a weight at his heart, and a tear, the first he had shed, rolled down his cheek as he kissed the poor face of the mother who had made the years at La Geniviére so happy and peaceful. She gave him one feeble kiss. Her lips were quite cold. Their touch sent a shock as of pain through Pierre.

He stood upright again, and saw that his mother's eyes were no longer looking at him; he turned in the direction of their gaze.

His father was leaning against one of the uprights of the fireplace, his forehead drawn into a deep line, and looking as fierce as when a short time before in the granary he had cried: "Go! It is I who drive you away." The old Vendéean was there to see his word carried into execution. The mother might plead, and he himself might suffer, but nothing would prevail against the outraged honour of the family.

Pierre, however, went up to him and held out his hand.

"Good-by, father," he said.

The farmer, unmoved, did not stir from his position, but with his hands still behind his back replied:

"Put your things together and make haste; Jacques will help you to carry them."

Pierre turned away. He felt that everything was over. He looked round for Jacques and saw him kneeling in one corner with Antoinette, beside the old oilskin trunk, just finishing the packing of some clothes and linen, and a few small things wrapped in paper. More things certainly than Pierre possessed. He staggered across the room; he felt that at last his strength was going from him.

"Good-by, Marie," he said weakly. "Good-by, Antoinette; come, Jacques."

He seized one side of the trunk and Jacques the other, and they slipped out together through

the open door, leaving the women weeping afresh.

It was dark outside and the air was sharp. The brothers hastened along the road in order to catch the coach that ran from Beaupréau to Cholet. They hardly spoke at all, each being full of his own thoughts, and even when they paused and put the box down to take breath, it was done of tacit accord and almost without a word.

At the end of three-quarters of an hour they reached Beaupréau.

When they came to Breteaudeau's Inn, they found the coach ready to start, the awning fastened, the door open, and the innkeeper giving a final inspection of the harness.

Pierre and Jacques embraced one another.

"Have you enough money to take you to Paris?" asked Jacques.

"I have not much," replied Pierre—"just enough for the journey. But once there I shall find Loutrel, who will give me some. I foresaw all this, you see, some time ago."

"Mother has been worrying about it," said the younger, "and she has put forty francs in the trunk, to the left among the handkerchiefs. We shall see each other again, shall we not, Pierre?"

"I don't know, Jacques. Be a good soldier, since you are obliged to serve. Keep well—thank mother for me——"

A moment later the diligence had started, and was already climbing the hill. Jacques, running as hard as he could, followed for a little while in the dense shadow.

When he reached the last houses of the little town, he was obliged to stop, exhausted, and the red rays from the two lanterns which had been keeping him company gradually disappeared in the fog and the darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

It was late, long after midnight. Jacques was back from Beaupréau. The farmer, his wife, and Marie, were asleep in the *chambre*, but Antoinette could not close her eyes; agitated in mind, all kinds of curious and disturbing thoughts kept sleep away from her.

When from the steady breathing that came from the adjoining beds she was sure that everybody was sleep, she rose, felt for the key of the cupboard, kept under one of the candlesticks on the mantelpiece, and noiselessly opened the polished folding doors of the immense piece of furniture on which the light from the moon was still resting. An odour of lavender stole into the room.

The large cupboard was not opened every day. On each shelf were layers of linen, arranged in the most beautiful order, without a fold awry, without a spot, or a hole to mend; sheets, table-napkins, handkerchiefs, shirts, and here and there, in the niches formed by the inequalities of height of these white piles, an orange from the Landehue hot-houses, a bundle of receipts, images, pots of grain, a bottle of arquebusade water with a little twig in soak—in short, all kinds of precious things. Antoinette, with the unhesitatingness that comes with habit, put her hand to the left, and from the back of their hiding-place drew forth the worked

roses which had been intended for the alb. One by one she took them up, and looked at them from the first, which had been such a trouble to get right to the last, so regular in its blossoming. And to think of all the evenings they had worked at them—of all the enthusiasm and happiness they had felt—of all the hours that had been full of the thought of him. She seemed to live them all over again as she counted the dozens of roses which she carefully placed one beside the other. There were more roses than she had thought—eight, nine, twelve, twenty—whole piles. How quickly they had got on with the work!

Then she took the roses and wrapped them in a napkin, fastening the four corners together with a pin. After that she gave a last look at the little packet that contained so many lost hopes, both of her own and others, lifted it tenderly to her lips, kissed it, and then quickly shut the door of the cupboard.

She could hardly breathe; she felt as if she had just interred something precious.

PART THE SECOND.

CHAPTER XII.

TOWARD the end of the summer Mélie Rainette's father died.

It was no great loss to her, but still she was grieved at his death. Brutal as he was, Rainette had not been without his good moments. And then, even though drunk, or asleep, there had been a consciousness of his presence—a rough witness, it is true, but still a witness to, and a reason for, her labourious life. "Thanks to me," she had often said to herself, "he will never want for anything." And the thought had given her a courage and cheerfulness beyond belief.

After his death, the days seemed longer in this house where nothing moved or spoke except herself. She continued working in the evening, lighted by a petroleum lamp hung against the wall. For her father had left debts behind him which would require active service on the part of pedals and shuttles to pay off. Supper over—and this meal did not take long—Mélie went back to her loom, and late into the night she might be seen still sitting on her weaver's stool.

This explained why lately she had become more

dreamy. That which she could no longer speak, she dreamed about, as well as about a good many other things, of which she never would have spoken. But this did not prevent her sticking valiantly to her work, or from being good-humoured whenever she chanced to go out and meet her neighbours. Solitude had, however, developed a taste in her for these long meditations which delude and soothe the unoccupied heart.

Like every one else there were certain things about which she liked to sit and think better than others. And, possibly, without acknowledging it to herself, it was of Pierre Noellet she thought the most.

How could it have been otherwise? Every one was talking about him. His sudden departure for Paris had been quite an event at Fief-Sauvin. Some of the kinder-hearted people pitied the Noellets. The greater number talked scandal about the matter and drew a warning from it for others. All the petty jealousies were let loose, and everybody gave reins to their imagination. Each had his own story, and every story was taken up and discussed to satiety among this rural population, that was full of curiosity and seldom enjoyed the chance of having anything new to talk about.

"You know that he has not yet written?" said one woman, a weaver; "and he gone a month! It's enough to make Mère Noellet ill."

"Well, to think of a blow like that!" replied Mère Huet, the grocer's wife, as she sat spinning on her doorstep. "A boy who has cost them hun-

dreds and thousands in order that he might one day be a priest, and he has never even set his foot inside a seminary. I hear that he and his father came to blows."

"Yes, on the threshing-floor—the miller saw them. The father had a fork in his hand."

"A fork!"

"And the boy a stick."

"Did they hurt each other?"

"No, for the mother ran out and separated them. But it is a sad affair; better to be without children altogether, like you, Madame Huet, than to have such a son as Pierre Noellet."

"Let the boy be," cried out the elder Fauvêpre from the back of his shop, for he had overheard the women talking. "I dare say he was in the wrong, but I shall always like him."

And Mélie Rainette's feeling about the matter was similar. She was surprised herself at having been so ready to side with him in his change of vocation, which seemed to others so sad and blameworthy a matter; for she, like the rest of the town, still believed that Pierre had really felt himself called to be a priest. When at the close of service on Sundays she saw the Noellets, no longer looking proud and willingly stopping to return the greetings of the many who came up to shake hands with them, but hurrying home by the shortest way to La-Genivière, she questioned herself as to the reason of her indulgence toward the friend of her youth. She found none, except in the number and violence of the attacks that were made upon him by others. Who was there to

stand up for him, if she did not? And what more natural than that she should make excuses for the brother, seeing that she was his sister's most intimate friend? At the same time, she did not always dare say what she thought. The world is so evil, so ready to suppose that there is self-interest —a something of egoism, where there is nothing but pure pity.

It happened that one afternoon in October, as she was meditatively pursuing the same train of thought, feeling somewhat anxious at the lack of news, and at not being able even in imagination to follow the absent one about that Paris she had never seen, that she fell asleep. The heat was overpowering. Huge thunder clouds, curling over at the edges like waves, were rising from every quarter. In the street, even in the cellar, where the square of sunlight fell through the window, the demented flies were flying in and out among each other, exhausting the miserable remainder of their lives in the intoxication of noise and movement. Everything human, on the contrary, was keeping silence, and if it had not been for a few distant sounds of work, the spinning-wheel of Mère Mitard, and the shears of a neighbour who was cutting his hedge, one might have taken it for a deserted town.

Mélie, therefore, was sleeping, with her head fallen back against the wall. Her arms were hanging down, while her hand, even in sleep, still held a bit of thread, even as her head still held a bit of thought.

A girl's face appeared, looking through the

window from the outside, smiled, and vanished. A minute later the trap-door leading to the cellar was opened, and Antoinette carefully climbed down the ladder. She went up to Mélie, drew a letter from her pocket, while her smile became more pronounced as she thought of the surprise she was going to give her friend, and then leaning over the sleeping girl, she said:

"Mélie, I have a letter from Pierre, in which he speaks of you."

The sleeper slowly opened her eyes, without moving; gradually a light came into them—a look of intense joy. She threw her arms round Antoinette, and in the low-veiled voice of one still dreaming, murmured:

"Ah, let me embrace you."

Pierre's letter was neither long nor very affectionate; it was addressed to his mother.

"I was forced to leave La Genivière under circumstances which prevented me from speaking to my father on a matter upon which it is necessary for me now to enter. I am driven from home—that is understood; I am reduced to earning an independent living for myself, without any help or assistance from you, and I accept the fact, and acknowledge that I brought it upon myself; but I have a right which my father cannot deny me, that of asking for the money which was left me four years ago as a legacy by my uncle of Montrevault. I am lodging with Loutrel, on the Quai du Louvre, and am living on money which he has advanced me; but this state of things cannot continue.

"As regards other matters, I am in good health, and I hope shortly to get employment which will be sufficient to keep me while I wait for what the future will bring me.

"If there are any at Fief-Sauvin whom I may still consider as friends, remember me to them. Tell Mélie, who was always kind to me, that I have not forgotten her."

There was nothing more in the letter beyond a commonplace expression of affection to his mother.

When Mélie had finished her perusal of the letter, reading the last words over a second time, she said:

"I am the only person he mentions by name." And the smile that had lighted them before rose again to her eyes, but, unwilling to let the younger girl see her happiness, which she would not have understood, she added quickly: "Your mother will feel easier in her mind now."

"A little; she was quite ill with the suspense of the long silence."

"And your father?"

"Oh, my father."

"What has he said in answer to Pierre's demand?"

"He said: 'I will send him neither the money he asks for nor any other. I have already spent more upon him than I ought; we are now quits. What is more, the money left by his uncle of Montrevault is vested in my land, in my cattle, in the wheat that I sow and reap. Let him come, then, and fetch it!'"

"He always irritated Maître Noellet a good deal, was it not so?"

"Yes. And the house is not very lively, I can tell you, Mélie. Father hardly speaks at all now. Mother cries when we are alone with her. Jacques is off to be a soldier. Sister Marie is still the cheerfullest of us all."

"And why is that?"

"I think on account of Louis Fauvêpre."

"How, Louis Fauvêpre?"

"Yes. He has been a great many times to La Genivière to ask if we have not any ploughs that want mending. First of all, as you may know, it is not the custom for blacksmiths to frequent the farms like that; and then, whenever he does come, Marie is sure to be there."

"Really?"

"And I need not say that it is not the ploughs he looks at. He does not even throw a glance toward me. It's all for Marie. And I suppose she finds it consoling, for she is always in a good humour the days that he has been here."

"Just hark to the child!" said Mélie, laughing.

"So I was right to bring you the letter?"

"Yes, darling."

"And you are happy?"

"Yes, quite."

"Good-by, Mélie."

And Antoinette went back up the ladder. Yes, she was happy, was Mélie Rainette, and had no wish now to sleep. She repeated the sentence in Pierre's letter about herself. Far off in the great city, where there were so many new things to dis-

tract him, to have preserved the remembrance of a poor girl like herself, and to have sent her word of it, was that not something wonderful, something well fitted to give pleasure? Her heart beat joyously. She felt buoyant. She was seized with a longing to go out and walk in the sun, in the light. The weaving seemed harder work to her than usual, and the thread broke. A light breeze that had stolen in through the open trap-door blew round her caressingly.

At the same moment Mélie remembered that there was a cap belonging to Mère Mitard, of which she had been mending the lace, that ought to have been taken back to her before. The excuse was enough, and it was no time before Mélie was out in the street and had reached her destination. On Mère Mitard's window-sill stood a pot of the old-fashioned flower known as "pyramids," now only grown by good peasant women. This one was of a beautiful violet colour, as was most suitable for a widow, and in full blossom from top to bottom of the stem; it swayed backward and forward in the wind, in spite of the stick to which it was fastened by bands of rush. "There are the flowers saying good-day to me now!" thought Mélie, and she went in, smiling gayly.

"Good-day, pretty one!" said Mère Mitard, "you do look cheerful! One would think the spring was coming. What's happened to you?"

"I have brought back your cap," answered the weaver's prudent daughter.

"There was no such hurry about it; but you wanted to stretch your legs a bit, wasn't that it?"

Mitard, whose rheumatism
to leave the easy-chair of
was now sitting, was fingering
ning it through her whitehorn-
It had to be well looked at
mended, turned over, held up
e if every thread was right, and
When she raised her head in the
culiar to old people, she perceived
standing in front of her looking
arden window, her eyes lost in the
or some minutes she watched her,
rl continued to gaze at something far
landscape, or in life, with the same
look on her face. Then a kind, grand-
mile passed over Mère Mitard's face.
dear girl," she said, "there is surely
g the matter with you?"
me, Mère Mitard?"
something with the heart. You will not
, but I know it for all that."
lie turned her eyes, so clear, so bright, that
m light seemed to shoot from them toward
ld woman.
What makes you think so?" she said.
"Ah, my dear girl, I have been young myself."
At these words Mélie broke into her sweet,
nging laugh, there in that room into which so
much youth and happiness seldom entered. There
was no mockery in it; it was just Mélie's way of
saying neither no nor yes, and of making her
The neighbours wondered what could
o serious a young woman show her white

teeth like that as she ran out of the house, while Mère Mitard dragged herself to the door and looked after her, giving queer, sympathetic little shakes and nods of her head.

CHAPTER XIII.

PIERRE'S mother undertook to answer his letter, Antoinette being the actual scribe. It was full of tenderness and affectionate words, and of little maternal counsels regarding his manner of life. Mère Noellet also sent her ungrateful son an account of anything new and interesting to herself that she knew about, showing that she still looked upon him as a child of La Genivière, and that she forgave, although no forgiveness had been asked. She did not touch on the question of money, having neither the authority nor the warrant to do so. She wound up her letter with the words:

"Do not leave us long without a line to let us know at least how you are. Perhaps we should not understand what you wish to do, and you are right to hide it from us. But to be assured you are in health, and to see your handwriting, believe me, my Noellet, is some little consolation."

Letters, in fact, from Pierre did reach La Genivière during the late autumn and following winter. Short and commonplace as they were, full only of vague hopes which proved that he was still in the same condition of discomfort and uncertainty as at first, they were eagerly looked for by his mother and sisters, and, after being

read till they were nearly known by heart, were put with their envelopes among other precious objects in the cubboard.

The father never read them, although he was able to some extent to decipher handwriting; he learned the contents of them from the others, without giving any sign of either pleasure or disapproval. The name of the son who had lost his place at the hearth, by insulting his own race and the land that had fed it, never passed his lips. Only when he saw the women whispering together he would ask, "What are you talking about there? Has there been another letter?" And then, in a few words, they would communicate the meagre intelligence they had received. He pretended not to be aware that one or other of them always answered Pierre's letters, which they hid as far as they could, confiding them to some school-boy to post, in fear that the father might be angry at their taking them to the town themselves and then forbid all correspondence.

This deep-seated resentment on the part of the master of the house had introduced a feeling of constraint between the members of the family which had been before unknown. The days passed sadly, and the evenings were gloomy; outside the winter was melancholy also. It rained incessantly. The same cold, cutting wind blew unceasingly, driving endless mists over the dead trees and the ploughed-up fields. At times the mad, tumbling masses of cloud rushed together, and became mingled and confused as they rolled and wheeled; at others the whole sky was covered

with one uniform sheet of gray, an immense expanse of mists that had gathered from the distant seas, and from which the rain fell uninterruptedly for weeks at a time. The wheat, just appearing above the ground, turned yellow. The roads, soaked with wet, made traffic of all kinds difficult. The Evre overflowed its banks, and, turned into a torrent, destroyed or carried away whole corners of the fields.

The lugubrious winter brought a double anxiety to the Noellets—anxiety for their threatened harvests, anxiety on account of Jacques, their second son, who had been carried off from them by conscription. The separation, so much dreaded by all concerned, had taken place in November. The whole family, assembled at the gate of a field along the high road of Fief-Sauvin, had seen Jacques, a tricoloured ribbon in his hat, drive off in a covered cart full of singing, tipsy recruits.

Since that day his mother had hardly known how to live, knowing her boy far away from her at Angers, in a strange town. She thought of him day and night, wondering that this child, who had always seemed to hold a lesser place than his elder brother at La Genivière, had yet left such a void by his departure. The truth was that Jacques, besides being good, was also weakly, and a very little knocked the strength out of him. He had had a large share of pity. And now that she could no longer spend herself upon him, the mother was troubled, and worried herself incessantly. She thought with uneasiness of the long marches, for he so soon got out of breath; of the

drill he would be put through, of his having to fag for his companions, and, above all, of the bad language and bad example that might be the ruin of her Jacques. Hideous dreams tormented her at night; of the hospital, or the fighting at Tonquin, of which there was so much talk; sometimes she thought she saw a soldier like her son fall wounded with a little red spot near his heart. She tried to lift him in her arms, so as to carry him to the wood, where there was an ambulance; but he was too heavy and fell back, the bright blood, derived from her, flowing from him in streams. Then she cried aloud, imagining that she heard the moan of the dying man. And her husband, waking, would say, "Our boy, wife, has not yet taken the field; he is in his bed, sleeping more soundly than you are." Although less nervously constituted than his wife, and slower and soberer in thought, at bottom his heart was troubled with the same anxiety, and he felt a keen resentment against those who immediately and indirectly had caused Jacques to be taken from them; he bore a grudge against Napoleon whose legendary name meant for him conscription; against the Government, against the army doctor who had declared his son fit for service, and a deeper grudge still against Pierre, whose ambition had been the ruin of everybody, including his brother, whose exemption he might have procured.

Yes, it was a long and unhappy winter for the whole family.

It was toward its close that Marie one morning was busy heating the oven in the bakehouse which

stood at the end of the house close on the road. She had left the door open. She stood, her figure lit up by the flame that was licking the door of the oven, waiting until the last fagot should be consumed before dividing the coals and drawing them to the front, preparatory to placing the bread in the oven. A large white apron covered her from her shoulders downward. Suddenly a shadow fell across the floor of the bakehouse. Marie turned round. She showed no surprise at the sight of Louis Fauvêpre, who stood not daring to enter, nor manifested any shame at her attire, which was her livery of labour, and said:

"Oh, it is you."

"Yes, Mademoiselle Marie," replied the blacksmith, "I came because—I had business, you see——"

"Another plough?"

"Oh no!"

He appeared preoccupied, which she was quick to perceive.

"Was your business to do with me?" she asked.

"No, Mademoiselle Marie; but I saw you in here heating the oven, so I just looked in to say good-morning."

"Well, you have said it now, Monsieur Fauvêpre, and I thank you. For whom are you looking?"

"Maître Noellet."

"You will find him near the stables."

The farmer was not far off. He was, as his daughter had said, at the farther end of the courtyard near the stables, emptying a cart of cabbages

for the cattle. His blouse was streaming with wet from the water that ran off the fleshy, ribbed, violet-hued leaves, as he seized large armfuls of them and threw them into an empty stall. He dried his hand on the back of his blouse, and held it out with a friendly gesture to the young man.

"Good-morning, Louis Fauvêpre," he said. "What brings you here?"

"A piece of news I have for you."

"About whom?"

"About Jacques."

Never being idle, Julien Noellet had from force of habit returned to his work, but he now stopped short in what he was doing.

"I was at Angers yesterday," continued Louis, "and I saw him. He has suffered terribly at leaving you, poor boy."

"It was unjust of them, was it not, Louis Fauvêpre, to take him from me?"

"I think so, indeed, and he will never make a soldier."

"They treat him harshly, is that it?"

"Rather."

"And he is ill, maybe?"

"Yes, Maître Noellet."

"I thought so at once. In bed?"

"No."

"I am glad of that, for with us if we take to our beds— Is he very ill, Louis Fauvêpre? Hide nothing from me; tell me all. His mother will not overhear us here."

He trembled, waiting for the reply.

"Why, no," said the young man, affecting to

think that the farmer was over anxious; "I do not think that it is anything serious. A neglected cold, fatigue, and chiefly his trouble of mind—that is what is the matter with him. He has a slight cough. The best cure for him would be to have his mother with him. I promised that she should go and see him."

"You did well, my boy; she shall go."

Then they both became silent, each trying to hide from the other the end to which their sad thoughts were tending. The farmer sighed deeply and pressed Louis' hand in his. As the blacksmith's son went across the courtyard to regain the footpath the farmer followed him with his eyes, thinking how handsome and loyal he was; and how tell of that other thought from which he turned away as from a temptation? He envied the blacksmith Fauvêpre.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was decided, therefore, that Perrine Noellet should go to Angers.

She started after dark, Antoinette and Marie accompanying her, while the farm-servant drove them across the sleeping Mauges. Each with her head wrapped in a handkerchief tied under the chin, they jolted along in the tilted cart, benumbed, and falling asleep during the slow ascents of the hills, and waking up in the fresher current of air when La Roussette resumed her trot; and so the three women arrived at last before daybreak at Chemillé along the Yallais road, and thence started by the first train to Angers.

The moment they alighted at the station, and while looking round them at their unknown surroundings, they took the handkerchiefs off their heads and arranged the strings of their caps as they were in the habit of doing on Sundays when they reached the town. Then they made their way to the infantry barracks, the two girls, in their countrified alpaca dresses of yellow brown, in front, and the mother, as usual in black, a few steps behind, carrying on her arm a large basket of provisions which she intended to take back full of haberdashery, remnants of stuff, and a host of other things that she had been coveting for months past. It did not take them long to reach

the barracks. It was close to the station, situated in a square where five streets met, which was crowded with groups of inquisitive loafers. On either side of the gate there was an assemblage of boys, of forwarding agents stopping to look on, of men out of work, and old soldiers with medals on their breasts; while within the regiment, in full uniform, was drawn up in three columns, the men with their arms grounded, standing immovable. Evidently something or somebody was expected.

But Mère Noellet, who knew nothing of military orders, found her way through the crowd up to the sergeant of the guard, and, addressing him, said:

"Monsieur le Sergeant, I wish to see my son who is ill."

"What is his name?" asked the sergeant, whose mouth stretched to his chin-strap.

"Jacques—Jacques Noellet."

"Second of the third. He is in his place. When the review is over. The company is already riding in, as you see. Clear the way! Clear the way!"

And, indeed, as he spoke a detachment of troops, headed by their band, was seen turning the corner of the street; they were bringing in the regimental colours. The tri-coloured silk banner, taken from its usual covering, was advancing half unfurled, shining in the morning sun. A flash of light gleamed from its gold fringes. It passed in a whirlwind of dust and shouting. The escort poured into the barrack-yard, and took up the position to the right appointed for them, while the sub-lieutenant, who carried the colours, sup-

ported by two sergeants, remained with his back to the troops, facing the Colonel. His gloved hand grasped the staff. All tongues were hushed; all eyes were turned toward him.

The Colonel's voice of command broke the silence: "*Baïonnette au canon!*" The commanding officers repeated, "*Baïonnette—on!*"

There was a wheeling about of glittering steel on a level with the men's heads. Again the Colonel's voice was heard, "Shoulder arms! Present arms!" The commanding officers once more repeated, "Shoulder arms! Present arms!" A farther shifting of arms, and then each man stood with a gray barrel barring his chest. The regiment saluted. Then the Colonel cried, "The flag!" as he at the same time lowered his sword, and the music broke into a loud flourish—bugles, flutes, brass basses, nickel-silver bomb-vessels—all hymning the glory of the flag which floated gently in the air, as if stirred by the thrill of pride that ran through the crowd.

Pierre's mother and sisters had stationed themselves in the front row beside the gate, and as the regiment filed past on its way to the field of manœuvres they sought eagerly for Jacques. But the soldiers were all so much alike, dressed in their red and blue, and they marched too quickly. There was hardly time to scan the faces in a single line. How was it possible to recognize one's dearest friend in this moving mass? Marie and Mère Noellet soon gave up trying, dazzled by the fatiguing succession of bright colours; but Antoinette never turned her eyes away for a mo-

ment. She loved her brothers with a deep, sweet affection; she was their favourite sister. She was determined to see Jacques. And now, just as about half the men had marched past, she heard an adjutant close to her say in a low voice:

"No. 7, do you want three days' confinement in the barracks to teach you how to carry your rifle?"

She looked in the direction indicated by the adjutant's gesture and by the movement of the men's heads, and saw the man thus addressed.

Her heart sank within her. No. 7, with the pink colour still on his face, although it had grown much thinner, with large hollow blue eyes, bent shoulders, and a general look of suffering, with nothing of the soldier about him but his uniform and his obedience, was Jacques, the brother, the dearly-loved son, he whom the father was still looking forward to have as his help in the future.

How he had changed!

"Poor lad!" said a boy near her. "He won't last much longer."

She turned quickly aside. Her eyes overflowed with tears. Her mother and Marie had not seen or heard anything. They were talking to each other. Soon the three women were being borne along by the crowd that followed in the wake of the regiments. Along the roads, along the boulevards planted with trees, they were pushed forward, in spite of themselves, to the beat of the music that was still playing ahead of them. Now and again Mère Noellet would say: "It's funny

that my Jacques should be there and I not see him! But I want to see him very much!"

Marie replied with an absent-minded smile, seemingly lost in thought of something far away, and of purely personal interest.

And Antoinette, generally the gayest of the party, remained a little in the rear, grieved to the bottom of her soul, keeping her eyes fixed on the rank where No. 7, whom she knew by the sunburnt nape of his neck, was marching.

It was not until two hours after the close of the review that Mère Noellet was able to see and embrace her child. She took him with her to a little restaurant near the barracks, made him sit down facing her, ordered the best of everything for him, or to be more correct, everything that he liked. She watched him eat without touching a thing herself, absorbed in her contemplation of him, from which she only roused heself to ask:

"Will you have anything else? Nuts? You used to like them. Coffee? You must take advantage of my being here, my Jacques, it's a holiday to-day."

She thought him looking sadly pale, and was even more painfully struck by the dull hollow sound of his voice. And how prettily he used to sing when at La Genivière. From time to time, too, he paused in his talking or eating to give a hoarse cough, and she felt her own chest racked by the mere echo of it. After each fit of coughing he looked at her and smiled, with the same smile and the same soft blue eyes that she knew so well. For as regarded his thoughts and feelings, barrack

life had made no change in him; he was just as artless and simple as of old, just as anxious not to give trouble to others, just as brave in face of misfortune. He did not complain, did not even speak about himself. All his talk was turned to La Genivière, to Pierre, of whom he wanted to know as much as possible; he inquired after the sowing, after the short clover that the rain might have spoiled; after his pet oxen, Vermais and Fauveau; and after La Roussette. Was she still as good a trotter? Did the man look after her properly? Did he, above all, see that a cloth was thrown over her when she came home hot from ploughing or from market. It would be a terrible pity if she were to be ill.

He also asked for news of Louis Fauvêpre, turning as he spoke toward Marie, who was sitting beside him, and adding:

"I saw him one day; he spoke to me about certain things."

The things were evidently not of a very mysterious nature, for Marie understood and blushed, and then was overcome with shyness at having shown her feelings before the assembled company.

"He is a fine, handsome lad," continued Jacques, still banteringly; "if there was any girl among my acquaintances wishing for a husband, I should advise her to take him."

Marie turned a little redder, and Jacques, not quite knowing how to carry on the subject, finished up with:

"Then he is quite well?"

"Yes," replied Mère Noellet. "And you, my Jacques? You have a cough, I hear."

"Yes, only a slight one. I think I have a cold on my chest."

"And when did you get that?"

"I think it began in December, after one of our marches. We were wet to the skin, and I was very cold, but there was no means of warming myself. I get feverish sometimes at nights."

"Is it often so?"

"No, not every night—only when they work us too hard."

"Why don't you go and see a doctor?"

"The Major? No!" replied the soldier, shaking his head; "if we go to him with any complaint he puts us under lock and key—I would rather keep away from him."

"I should like to know what it is, all the same," said his mother, whose wrinkled lids fluttered more rapidly than usual. "But perhaps you will get better when the weather turns a little warmer."

"Yes, mother, I am sure I shall," he said with a weakly smile as he pressed her hand. "I feel better already for having seen you."

"And it has done me good, too, my dear boy—only," she continued after a moment's silence, "if the fever gets worse you must write to me."

Jacques turned aside, looking a little ashamed, and, half laughing, he replied:

"I have tried to, but I have forgotten how to write."

They left the restaurant, and spent the afternoon walking about together. The weather had

turned mild for them. Jacques walked between his mother and Marie and continued without ceasing to talk of his home. He had left off coughing. The evening was sweet and fine. Mère Noellet parted from her son feeling somewhat less anxious than when she had arrived.

CHAPTER XV.

A FEW weeks after Mère Noellet's visit Jacques was sent home on sick leave. He was let off duty at last, but it was late in the day. Death had him already in his grip, as every one, except his mother, who still cherished some hope, sadly believed. She was determined to save him by any manner of means and at any cost. With a renewal of the activity and tenderness of the young mother, she nursed him untiringly, fighting from hour to hour of the day and night to keep him from the terrible enemy that was continually lying in wait. She might be seen every afternoon in the roads near the farm with her son's arm in hers, supporting the tall, stooping figure of her boy, who wheezed with every breath. They generally chose the hill, whence across the wooded slopes could be seen the fields lying along the Evre, and the expanse of sky, so blue at this season of the year, and feel the warm, soft breezes that swayed and bent the long grass.

"We will sit down here awhile, my Jacques," she would say. "You are feeling a little better, I think. Try and breathe the air; see, it is nice and sunny." And the poor boy would do his best to inhale the invigorating breezes which had formerly seemed to give him fresh life. But the lungs refused to expand; the little air that he was

able to draw in caused him acute pain, and the cough returned, nearly suffocating him, while his forehead became bathed in sweat. Then the mother, drawing the sufferer to her bosom, would comfort him, saying: "Never mind, my Jacques, you are better all the same; you have only had three fits of coughing this morning."

He was not a difficult patient to nurse, and he never complained. At times, when he was a little easier, the gentle, innocent smile of old days would return to his blue eyes, which were now paler, and always held tears which never fell. Then he would talk a little, in broken sentences, as short as his breathing, in which recollections of the past were mingled with plans for the future, when he should be well again, and of warm expressions of love for those belonging to him, and for the home which he had found again. Pierre's name was often on his lips at such moments, and if his father chanced to be absent he would get some one to read him one of the letters kept in the large cupboard, or would himself recall things that had happened in the past, tales of old schoolboy pranks, which always ended with the same words: "I was so fond of my Pierre!"

Soon, however, the walk on the hillside had to be given up. Too weak to bear the fatigue of even so slight an effort, the invalid now only left his room for the courtyard of the farm. It was an immense court, full of life. His father passed through it with his horses and carts, his cartloads of green fodder. The spring sun was shining on the tiles. Chickens, pigeons, and ducks pecked and

cooed and squabbled in every corner. His mother had had a little bench, with arms and back, put up for him beneath the vine along the sunny wall beside the house-door. Whenever the day promised to be fine she brought out pillows, and there Jacques would lie, surrounded with the sounds of home, watched over by those belonging to him, and almost happy.

Antoinette, as often as she could, brought a chair and sat to do her sewing or crochet-work beside him. Those were his most enjoyable hours.

"Antoinette," said Jacques one day toward the end of April, "Antoinette, I am dying."

"What are you talking about?" replied the girl, leaving off her work in her distress. "You know how miserable you make me when you say such dreadful things! See what beautiful weather we are having now. Little by little you will get better."

"No, I am going to die," repeated Jacques. "You must not say so to mother, but I am sure of it."

"Do you want to make me cry and send me away, Jacques?"

"Of course not. I should not have said this to you if I had not had a request to make."

"What is it you want?"

Jacques lifted his head with difficulty, looking to see that no one was listening from the window above.

"I want to see Pierre once more," he said in a low voice.

"It is impossible; what would father say? You know how he drove him away!"

"I want to see him all the same," continued the sick boy, growing excited.

The pink patch on his cheek turned purple; a fit of coughing seized him, and for some minutes he could not speak. He leaned his head down away from his sister, and murmured, exhausted, his eyes half-closed:

"Let me die, then. It was the only thing I wished for, and you will not help me!"

"Jacques," said Antoinette, who had risen and was leaning over him, "I would ask for nothing better myself, as you know well. But would Pierre himself be able to come, and would he wish to do so?"

"He will come!" replied Jacques, again greatly agitated. "I tell you he will come!"

"Well, do not distress yourself any more, my Jacques," said Antoinette, as she passed her hands over his moist forehead; "I promise you I will write."

He raised himself a little, and looked his thanks with his large eyes that were now quiet and shining.

"It is a secret," he said, with a faint smile.

"Only known to us two," responded Antoinette. Then she went into the house.

And he, left outside, seemed not to be aware of being alone, but lay quietly during the remainder of the afternoon, under the vine and the shade of the tiled roof, not once coughing, as if in a rapture of thought.

His mother, as she passed, thought he was better.

CHAPTER XVI.

MÉLIE RAINETTE had awakened early that morning in her large white bed. It was still dark when she opened her eyes, and the rain was falling heavily on the roof, which had been the cause no doubt of her waking with a start. "What a pity," she thought to herself; "I was having such a beautiful dream." In it she had seen resplendent skies, transparent dawns, flowery landscapes, roses, palm trees, ferns, with rays of light for leaves, prodigious and luminous vegetation, and angels moving in its midst. They seemed to be in some far distant and infinite space. And One like a flame separated himself from the others and grew visibly larger. Mélie could distinguish his wide-spread immovable wings, his golden hair, and his face. He came close to her, and as he stood by the bed he suddenly smiled, like a flower that opens all at once. "He reminded me rather of Pierre," she murmured to herself; "what curious things these dreams are!"

The warm, heavy rain was running down the roof with a monotonous murmur that more than a louder sound disturbed the silence of the night, making its way between the mosses, and the other parasitic plants that grew in clumps among the slates, till it separated into two channels, one of which fell into a jar, and the other on to a slanting

stone stuck into the earth. Each had a voice of its kind, but the tones of the two were different. The voice of the first seemed to say, "Jesus, my God, how they have drunk! How they have drunk!" while the other replied: "They will flower better! They will flower better."

"Yes," she thought, "the house-leeks are drinking on the roof; they were almost dried up yesterday. It is so long since it rained. They must have grown green again by this time—plants without even a sprinkling of earth round their roots—and they only want a shower of rain; and there they are full of flower, and the roof scented with them. I am somewhat like them; I have days of dryness, when I think I am going to fade and die away; and then there are others——"

The violence of the rain increased, beating against the walls, the roof, and the ground round the house, while the two streams kept up their incessant trill. "How they have drunk," said the earthen jar. "They will flower better," replied the stone.

In the midst of this deluge Mélie fancied that she caught the sound of a footstep on the road. The thought occurred to her, "supposing it was he." She sat up, leaning on her hands, listening. But no, there was no one passing. A few solitary sparrows, perched in the holes of the wall, were chirping in spite of the downpour. A streak of daylight stole through the cracks of the shutters and through the keyhole. Mélie rose and opened the window and began to dress.

Then gentle knocks against the garden-door

were heard through the silence of the house, and a voice that Mélie would have known among a thousand others—a voice she often heard in memory—called:

"Mélie, Mélie!"

She made haste to fasten her dress, and, without waiting even to put on her shoes, ran out of the room.

"Mélie, open the door!" called the voice again. "I am wet through."

The girl drew the bolt, and stood aside against the wall as Pierre Noellet entered, passing in front of her.

"Excuse me for begging shelter of you at this hour of the morning," he said, "but I saw from the road that your window was open, and I thought you would take me in. It is impossible to stay outside."

Mélie had remained standing at the door as Pierre walked into the middle of the room, where, after taking off his waterproof, which was streaming with wet, he threw it on a chair, and then went up to a mirror over the mantelpiece, in which he gazed at himself a second or two, passed his hand through his hair, which was cut short over his head, before turning and speaking to Mélie, who up to that moment had not uttered a word. She looked at him in mute astonishment. His free-and-easy manners, his elegantly cut coat, the pin stuck in his cravat, the look of confidence and cleverness on his face, were all revelations to her of the complete transformation that had taken place in the old friend of her youth. He was a

different man altogether; and as she looked at him, she was moved by a mingled feeling of admiration, pleasure, and fear. Whence had he come, and whither was he going at this hour through the rain? She stood without moving, leaning against the side of the door, while he stood also looking at her in the gray light of the early morning.

"Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed at last, "How you have—" and then she broke off, for he smiled kindly, aware of what she wished to say.

"How I have changed, you mean?"

Without answering she went up to him as he stood by the fireplace, and kneeling down, began to light the fire. She waited till the heather and wood, which had been drying there for a long time, had sent a bright flame up the chimney, and then rose, and telling Pierre Noellet to take a chair, she sat down herself beside him on a lower one. She did not dare lift her eyes to his face.

"You are changed, too," he said.

"For the worse, perhaps? I have grown old these last eight months."

"Not for the worse; quite the contrary."

She felt his gaze upon her, and modestly drew back her naked foot under the cover of her skirt.

"I have had great trouble, you know, and it would be strange if my face showed no traces of it."

"What farther trouble? Has work been slack?"

"No; but my father is dead."

"Yes, I heard about that from Antoinette."

"I nursed him for five weeks; it cost a great

deal of money. After his death I had his debts to pay off. You would hardly believe how I have had to work."

"My poor Mélie, your life has always been a hard one."

"I do not grumble about the work; far from it, I am strong, fortunately. The unhappiness to me is the being all alone, with no one to see or speak to, and no sound of any kind but what one makes oneself. At times, do you know, I even feel afraid. But I do not know what makes me always talk about myself—one ought not to do that. The truth is, I have not yet got over my surprise, so you must forgive me. Why are you here? where have you been travelling from through the night?"

"I have come from Paris to see Jacques."

"He is very ill," said Mélie.

"I know it, and that is why I have hurried to get here. I got as far as Chalonnes last evening by the train, and there I found a miller's cart, which carried me to Poitevinière. Sooner than put up for the night at the inn, I decided I would rather do the remainder of the journey on foot. It was beautifully fine when I started, but it began to pour in torrents before I reached the hill up to Villeneuve. What a storm it has been!"

He was squeezing the water out of the legs of his trousers, which smoked as they neared the flame.

"Your father let you in, then?" said Mélie.

"He let me in!" said Pierre, rising from his

stooping posture and looking at Mélie with an ironic expression on his face which distressed her. "You do not know him! I am proscribed, banished! He drove me from the house, and I must ask pardon from him before I shall ever be allowed to enter it again."

"Well, and why not?"

"One only asks pardon when one has been in the wrong!" replied Pierre stiffly. "No, I have had no permission from my father. It was Antoinette who secretly sent me word." Then, suddenly resuming his accustomed amiability, and smiling like the pupil of old days under Abbé Heurtebise, he continued: "It was even arranged, Mélie, that you should help us."

"In what way?"

"As I said, I cannot present myself at La Genivière; and so we thought, Antoinette and I, that you would not mind going and telling her when I had arrived, and then I will linger in a field, or road near, it does not matter where, and you two can bring Jacques to me, as if you were helping him out for a walk."

"Is he strong enough, poor boy?" said Mélie.

She had drawn back and turned to the window, reddening a little as she spoke. It was growing lighter; there was a sound of shutters being opened along the neighbouring street, and the distant rumble of carts, and Mélie was beginning to feel uncomfortable at the thought of having taken Pierre under her roof at this early hour.

She had not thought of that at first in the surprise and pleasure of seeing him again, and some

pity had mingled with her feelings at the thought of him in the pouring rain.

"Listen!" she said. The rivulet to the right was singing again, "They will flower the better!" but the tones were more broken, a sign that the storm was passing away. Before Pierre had had time to notice her discomfiture, Mélie, having made up her mind, said in her pleasant way: "We cannot go out just yet; but in ten minutes' time the rain will be over, and then I will help you as you wish."

"I knew you would say, 'Yes.' I know you so well! When we talk about you in Paris, we have never any ill to say; for we do speak about you, Mélie."

"With whom do you speak?"

"With the Laubriets."

"You see them, then?"

"Of course I do. I did not dare go and call on them, as you understand; but one day I met Monsieur Hubert in the street, and he held out his hand. 'Where are you lodging,' he asked, 'and what are you doing? Why have you given no sign of life? It is very wrong of you. Come and see me to-morrow.'"

"See what it is to be learned!" she exclaimed, with an admiring glance. "And you went as invivited?"

"Certainly. I went more than once, and now little Pierre Noellet is received by the lords of Landehue, of whom he stood formerly in such awe. He dares to speak to them. He is greeted as a friend. And this last month, since I have

been on a paper, I have often spent the evenings with them."

"You are a journalist?"

"Yes, I am on the *Don Juan*."

"You must be growing rich!"

"Not yet, Mélie, I am very poor as yet."

The girl looked at him with some surprise, and without speaking. How could he be poor as he said and yet be so well dressed?

"My words astonish you. Because I write for a paper and no longer dress as I used when at Fief-Sauvin, you think I must be well off."

"Yes."

"If you knew the extreme poverty I was in at first!"

"You, in great poverty?"

"I was for more than six months without any employment at all, trying in vain to find even the humblest post in some office, or teaching work of some kind, without any success. No one knew me, and no one wanted me. The start was a rough one, I can assure you."

"And I, here, without the slightest idea of such a thing!"

"Fortunately some one had pity on me, and took me under his protection, and restored my confidence in life which had nearly forsaken me."

"I guess it was Monsieur Laubriet!"

"No—an old professor who was lodging in the same house as myself—Monsieur Chabersot. Bear his name in mind, Mélie, for it is that of a most excellent man. When my own family deserted me, he helped and delivered me. Thanks to him,

I got on the staff of the *Don Juan*. But do not run away with the idea that I am making a fortune. I hardly earn enough to cover my expenses, and I have urgent debts to the amount of fifteen hundred francs."

"Fifteen hundred francs!" said Mélie, who had never in her life owned such a sum.

"I was obliged to borrow."

"How shall you be able to pay them?"

"My father owes me as much."

"That is true. You wrote to your father for the money last October."

"Will you believe that I have never had a word of reply from him? But he must give me answer of some kind, for Loutrel, who lent the sum to me, will not wait any longer. So much the worse, and I shall let him do what he advised me long ago."

"Are you going to bring farther trouble on your father, Pierre?"

"Oh no, Mélie, it is nothing. Do not disturb yourself."

"If I had the money," she said, "I would give it to you at once!"

Tears had started to Mélie's eyes. All that she had heard, and all that she guessed, made her heart sink within her. And how much more there must be of which she could know nothing, and what a stranger she had become to the life of the old companion of her childhood! Pierre guessed her thoughts, and said, smiling:

"You are a brave girl, Mélie; I have always known you kind and ready to help."

"You say that to please me!"

"No, I say it sincerely, and I am glad to see you again."

"Really?"

"Really!"

It was Mélie's turn to smile.

"And I too, Pierre, am glad," she said.

"Do you remember the time when I was a child?"

"Yes, of course I remember it."

"We were like brother and sister together."

"I used to see you go by every day."

"That was the best time after all, perhaps, Mélie."

She longed to say "yes," but contented herself with only thinking it, and letting him read the thought in her eyes, which now were bright with happiness and showed no tears. She rose and put aside the window curtain. Not a cloud left! Here and there the blue sky was still veiled by the light mists that were floating slowly away.

"The rain is quite over," she said. "Come!"

She put on her Sunday wooden shoes on account of the rain-soaked ground, and followed Pierre, who went out first and opened the garden-door. He paused a moment, struck with the beauty of the outside world. The flowers and grasses, the tiniest and humblest plant, everything seemed to be filled with renewed life after the rain, expanding and lifting their heads, and scattering such a variety of scents that it was intoxicating merely to inhale the air. The great rosemary bush seemed to have grown bigger still, and in the exuberance of its rejoicing sap, to wish to crush

the two hedges that supported its flowered branches. On the farther side the young yellow shoots of the oak tree were turning red in the morning sun. All the accustomed sounds were beginning to be heard as the country awoke to a feeling of youth again. Pierre listened to the voices that had been his lullabies as a child. Light and happiness reigned on every side.

"What will the people in the town think," said Mélie, "when they see us walking together?"

"That we are as good friends as ever," responded Pierre, "which is true."

They crossed the garden. At the farther end was a footpath which ran behind the town and led to La Genivière. Mélie and Pierre walked side by side, bathed in the morning freshness, and in silence. Mélie was happy. She walked slowly, so as not to arrive too quickly at their destination, secretly looking at their mingled shadows which were thrown against the bank of the road as they passed along. She hardly gave a thought to the sad meeting for which she was going to prepare the way. A song of triumph, longing to burst forth, was singing within her. Would not a day come when she would be walking thus, side by side with him, in a bride's dress, followed by a train of friends? To herself she acknowledged that he perhaps loved her. How handsome and tall and proud he was! She did not dare lift her eyes to look at him, but she had a divine consciousness of it.

At the turn of the path Pierre caught her by the arm. They had reached La Genivière. Mélie

looked at him, suddenly aroused from her dreams. Ah, assuredly Pierre's thoughts had been very different ones to hers. His face looked hard and careworn. The sight of the barn, which hid the house from them, had awakened in him no feeling but one of bitter resentment. He was uneasy at the thought of this surreptitious return to the paternal farm, and his eyes went wandering awhile over the adjourning fields.

"Mélie," he said, leaning toward her, his voice choked with emotion, "you said Jacques was not able to walk far."

"He can no longer walk alone."

"Then I will wait for him here."

He pointed to the door of the barn which opened on to the road that crossed the footpath.

"Here?" replied Mélie, hesitating. "So near the house?"

"Well?"

"I don't know—but—supposing your father were to meet you?"

"My father is willing to let beggars sleep in his barn!" replied Pierre. "Do not be afraid: I will not set a foot under his roof. Go now, Mélie."

"And your mother?" she said inquiringly.

"Do not let her know I am here. Of what use are farther scenes and tears, since I will not give in and do not intend to stay. And, besides, I have not come to see the living ones. Go and fetch Jacques, that I may be off again as soon as possible."

They emerged from the footpath, and, turning to the left, went as far as the end of the barn.

Pierre went inside and took his place among the beams, and poles, and barrel-hoops, which were there kept in store. A little farther on stood a rick of last year's hay, forming a precipitous wall where it had been cut away. Mélie turned the corner of the wall and gave a low cry.

On the threshold of the house, standing under the spreading branches of the vine, that looked as if cut out of emerald as they glistened with rain and sun, was the farmer himself. He was looking toward the open valley, where everything was bursting forth with joy and youth, taking count of the weather as was his daily morning custom. As he turned away his gaze, a farm-servant with a sickle passed before him. The farmer followed him with his eyes with a look of dejection, sighed, and stepped into the courtyard. Mélie saw him get over a cross-barred gate which stood at the end of the stable, and walk away past some trees bordering a field.

She ran toward the house. When she reappeared a few minutes later she was supporting Jacques on one side, while Antoinette held him up on the other. The poor boy, bent and shrunk with illness, looked quite small beside them. Fever was slowly consuming his strength, but the delight at seeing Pierre again had, for the moment, revived his energy. He took long steps as if he were running, although utterly unable even to stand upright without support; a painful smile —for he was never now free from pain—but still a smile, was on his swollen lips. His feet slipped and stumbled, growing weaker with every step,

but still he smiled as if health and life were awaiting him at the end of this journey of a hundred paces.

"My Pierre!" he exclaimed, when he reached the barn.

Pierre embraced him without speaking. He could not at first master his feelings, so overcome was he at the sight of his brother's terrible condition, and he held him for some minutes clasped to his breast, while he struggled to drive back his tears.

"Thank you for coming all this distance."

"If it had been any one else, they would have sent for me in vain," replied Pierre. "The others have driven me, or allowed me to be driven away. But you, you are my very youth; you were the only one who went with me when I had to leave."

"And I, too," said Jacques feebly, "am leaving for a long journey, and for a long time. You think me looking ill, do you not?"

"A little weak and thin," said Pierre.

"Do not try—then—I know it is all over for me. All I want you to tell me is what you, who will continue to live, are going to do; what is going to become of you? It makes me uneasy, do you understand? It was in great part for that reason that I begged Antoinette——"

His harsh, rattling cough checked his further words. At last it ceased, and Pierre sat down beside him, and began talking to him in a low voice. Jacques listened, responding with a nod, a look, a word. They had so often talked together like this over their plans, under the shadow of the

caves beside the Evre, as they watched the cows. The sweet remembrance of those past days haunted the poor invalid. A look of peace came into his eyes, turned toward the raftered roof of the barn, followed by an expression of admiration, of childish astonishment, which was replaced again by one of dissatisfaction and of passing anxiety.

"No," he said, at one point of the conversation, "you must ask pardon of them; I do not say to-day, since you do not wish it, but when I am——"

Pierre's answer, whatever it may have been, was inaudible to Mélie and Antoinette, who were standing on either side of the door. A murmur of voices, a few disjointed words, was all the sound that reached them. They were on guard, agitated by their mingled feelings, distress at the thought of the sad farewells that were taking place behind them, and fear that the farmer should appear. But not a soul was to be seen in the fields around. Not a sound issued from the farm. By which way would he be likely to come? From the farther side of the barn? By the garden way, where the sound of his step would be deadened in the soft newly turned earth? But, no, he had passed and had seen nothing, and must be now at some distant point of the domains, for Pierre and Jacques had been talking for a full quarter of an hour, unheeding of the time. They never paused in their talk, for the two brothers, after months of separation and on the eve of being parted for ever, had many things to say.

Mélie, however, began to get uneasy, but felt that it would be cruel to interrupt them. Antoi-

nette, feeling equally anxious, was beginning to regret that she had not taken her mother into their confidence. And, since everything seemed quiet, should she not go and tell her that Pierre was here before he went off again? It would not take a minute to run to the house and say to her:

"Come, come, Pierre is here; it is he. I tell you, he himself. Come!"

Just as she was on the point of darting off, Jacques became suddenly more excited, and began speaking in a louder voice. His poor weak body was quivering all over. He tried to raise himself on his hands, while his eyes dilated with anguish.

"No, no, my Pierre," he cried; "you cannot think of doing such a thing. You are deceiving me; you cannot——"

"But I do think of doing so," replied Pierre; "I have done so for years past——"

"Then give up the idea; say that you will give it up. It will bring trouble upon you. For my sake who am about to die——"

"I cannot."

"It is madness!"

"It is my life, Jacques!"

The sick man uttered a cry of suffering, which seemed to set the old barn itself shuddering.

"Ah," he cried, "it is all such pain to me!"

His strength gave way, his hands failed to support him any longer, and he fell back stretched at full length upon the ground with closed eyes and clenched teeth.

At that moment Antoinette called out:

"Father is coming! Father is coming!"

And she fled, out of her mind with fear.

It was indeed the farmer. He had run to the spot on hearing Jacques' cry and now suddenly rose up before them in full daylight. Mélie drew back to let him pass.

Frowning in his effort to pierce the semi-twilight of the barn, he caught sight of Pierre rising from his seat with Jacques lying stretched at his feet. The muscles of his face stiffened. He looked like an old Chouan in the midst of fight. He walked to the farther end of the barn with such a terrible expression of countenance that Pierre drew back into the shadow of the wall and rushed out.

"Come, Mélie," he cried, "or he will kill us."

Julien Noellet made no effort to stop him. He looked down on his unfortunate son lying in the dust, fearing that he was dead. He knelt and put his hand to the boy's heart; it was still beating; Jacques had only fainted. Then this strong, violent-tempered man lifted him up in his arms as gently as if he were a woman and carried him out of the barn.

Mélie and Pierre had stopped in their flight at the entrance to the footpath, which was some twenty paces off, and they now stood motionless, half hidden by the angle of the hedge. They did not know what to do, and had sought shelter there in their first moment of fright to await what might happen.

The father saw them, and held out the body of his son that they might have full view of his poor face, his dangling legs, and hanging lifeless hands.

"Look!" he called to Pierre, "look and see what you have done to your brother!"

And his anguish was so keen and undisguised that Pierre was unable to bear the sight of it. He turned and strode back down the path, hanging his head.

"And you, Mélie—you came with him, then!" continued Julien Noellet. "You, too, have betrayed me! Ah, now I understand; it is you who put all those ideas into his head—you who have taken him from me! Go and rejoin your friend!"

She had remained near the hedge, unable to speak or move. As she heard the farmer address her in this way, she felt as if her heart had received a blow. To be driven away from La Genivière! To be accused like this! No, she had not betrayed him! She would defend herself. She had been a little weak, but there was nothing else of which she could accuse herself.

But she was so taken aback that at first she could not open her mouth, and when at last she recovered her self-possession, the farmer had disappeared. He had carried his still unconscious son back to the house. She might still follow him, explain her conduct to him, and obtain his pardon. And at first she thought of doing so. But then that would be to desert Pierre, to let him go away alone after having brought him here. Pierre must already have gone some distance.

For a second or two she hesitated between Pierre and La Genivière, between all her old friendships and the man she loved. It was a heart-rending struggle, but love gained the mastery, and, turning

her back on the farm, she ran to overtake Pierre. When the two found themselves together again, on a level with the house behind Mélie's garden, no word of reproach escaped her lips. She had already ceased to think of herself.

"My poor friend," she said, "it has been a sad time for you."

Pierre had been waiting for her where the path was hidden between its deep banks. As Mélie spoke he lifted his head, too proud to let her see how greatly he was affected, and replied in the haughty and ironical tone which was familiar to him:

"You see now what my father is—unjust and violent."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go at once, and this time for ever."

"For ever, Pierre?"

"Yes," he said, "I shall never return again as long as I live, unless——"

He left his sentence unfinished and turned to where, through an opening in the hedge, the roof and shuttered windows of Landehue were visible. Then he added:

"I thank you, Mélie, for what you have done. I am only afraid that my father will now hate you as he hates me."

"I will bear that for your sake," she said softly.

She put her foot on the step of beaten earth, on to which the garden-gate opened, with the intention of returning to the house, but as she pushed open the little wicket, she half turned, and said sadly:

"Since I shall never see you again, tell me at least what made your brother faint? What had you said to cause him so much excitement?"

"In the condition he is in, it does not require much to upset him."

"No; answer me. I shall have no peace of mind when you are gone, trying to find out your secret; it will be a trouble to me for a long time to come."

"I have a secret, it is true, Mélie; I told it to Jacques: I am in love with some one."

"Well," she said—and a passing light flashed into her eyes—"what did he see in that to trouble him?"

"The one I love does not love me; that is the trouble."

She gave her head a wise shake, and answered:

"How do you know that?"

"I am afraid it is so."

"Is she a princess, then?"

"No."

"Do I know her?"

"Yes, very well."

"Well, then," she said, smiling in spite of herself, though she would have wished to hide the smile that was like a confession, "if you love her well, and were to tell her so, there is a chance, you may be sure, that you would find she loved you in return."

"Do you really think so, Mélie?"

"Yes, I do."

He went up to her quickly and took her by the hand, carried away by the overpowering thought

even of this possibility of hope, looking as handsome as a youth can look.

"You really think so? Perhaps you have already guessed? It is the whole secret, the whole strength of my life, a love of so long standing that I think I must have been born with it. All I do is in the hope of rising to her level, of making myself worthy of her. The mere thought that she might be able to love me, as you say, intoxicates me, and compensates me for everything else. You are right, Mélie, I will tell you her name."

"Yes, do so!"

"But you will help me, for it is in your power to do so?"

She smiled again by way of answer, as if to say: I shall indeed be able to help you, since the woman you love is not a princess. I know her very well, and she whom you loved so long time back is——

He drew her, happy and trembling, to him, leaned his head toward hers till the two nearly touched, so that none but she might hear the whispered name, and said:

"Madeleine Laubriet!"

Then he tore himself away, and running down the footpath, disappeared.

CHAPTER XVII.

MÉLIE, after a night spent in tears, had risen rather later than usual. She had just finished putting her room in order when a man-servant from Landehue thrust his frizzled head and a yellow-striped velvet waistcoat through the open window.

"Mademoiselle Mélie," he said, "the master and his family returned to Landehue last evening, and Mademoiselle Marthe begs that you will come up this afternoon to help her arrange her flower-baskets."

He went off without waiting for Mélie's answer, for she always accepted her invitations. It was a regular thing for her, and in general a great pleasure to go and spend an afternoon at Landehue during the fine weather. She was clever with her fingers, and skilled in delicate needlework, and possessed a natural quickness of eye and refinement of taste which rendered her an invaluable auxiliary on many occasions. Whether it was to make a ruche, to mount a ribbon-bow, or even to improvise a dress for a charade, Mélie was as ready at these tasks as at arranging flowers for the dinner table or bouquets to wear. The Mesdemoiselles Laubriet had only to send her word and she obeyed their summons with alacrity, delighted at the thought of a few hours of elegance and liberty.

But to-day she had no heart for such things. She sat down near the window, and, letting her head fall on her hands, began to cry again. She had so many peaceful, happy hours, so much lost courage, so much departed affection to weep for! Poor little dream of love! She had lived on it for so long past, and had hardly been conscious of the place it held in her heart. It had grown with a wild rapidity, like seeds that fall into a deep cave and there take root in the midst of the vacant spaces, and creep and grow to an inordinate height, till at last they reach the light; a bud, a pale flower, is all we see of the plant from outside, but within the darkness is full of luxuriant vegetation. Everything was destroyed, everything was dead, for Pierre did not love her; he loved another. No, she would certainly not go to Landehue. To see the one whom Pierre loved —no, indeed, to let something of her suffering be guessed! This Madeleine Laubriet, why should she want to take away the happiness of the poor? She had so much of her own without interfering with that of others. But it was the way of the world—all the happiness for some, all the misery for others. Up, slave, and get to your work. There is no time for tears. Go and take your seat on the old stool with its ragged straw edges, work the frame, tire your feet on the pedals, let body and soul become one with the machine, and stay there in the damp atmosphere of the cellar till you begin to fall asleep from exhaustion, till your eyes can no longer distinguish the threads, and on the morrow go to work again, and the day after, and

so continue till the day of your death—always poor, always alone.

What an irony of fate!

And agitated in mind and body, the weaver left her room and went down into the cellar. The machine began to creak, and to move at an irregular pace. How often she had sat working in this same place! The wood was quite polished with the friction of her hand. As she now came in contact with it she became more painfully alive still to the bondage of her hard-worked life, and her first feeling was of a disgust of life, a suppressed anger at not being able to throw off her yoke of poverty.

For a long time she struggled helplessly against the trouble that assailed her. A quick and involuntary glance toward the old plaster crucifix, which showed white amid the surrounding gloom of the cellar as it hung on the wall above the barrels filled with skeins of thread, brought the colour into her cheeks. What had become of the quiet, steady maiden that had been held up as a model of courage and patience? The Mélie of old days—so strong, so self-confident? The remembrance filled her with shame.

And then after a while—is there some hidden virtue in these tools of daily labour? Has something from our hours of calm passed into them to be given back to us one day?—she was conscious of feeling better. The machine, as it was worked with less unwillingness, began to move with its habitual rhythm. It began to argue with Mélie, and to represent to her with its little daily clacking, that she was wrong, and to remind her how

patient, merry, and happy it had known her, even in her poverty, before this love trouble had come upon her.

By degrees she came round to its way of thinking, and, as if to bestow a caress on her faithful servitor, she began to handle it with a willing servility, while it grew more and more docile under her supple hand. And as she drew the edge of the frame, that had grown white with wax and friction, it caught the thread of light that fell through the window and emitted a pale ray.

Mélie recognized this humble smile of her companion in labour, and all at once a fresh strength came to her, her will seemed to recover itself and to be able to throw off the weight of oppression and cowardice. She paused an instant in her work, and said half aloud and slowly, as if the machine could hear her words:

"I will go up to Landehue after all."

And the brave girl did in fact leave the house at the accustomed hour, and started across the park. The weather was superb, the grass already high, the whole land bright with springing verdure. But Mélie found no pleasure in it all. On reaching Landehue she found Marthe in one of the rooms seated in front of a table covered with heaps of flowers and leaves. Madeleine was not there, and Mélie experienced the feeling of relief of which we are conscious when the occasion for self-sacrifice becomes less immediate. Marthe greeted her with her usual abrupt good temper.

"Take a seat," she said. "It is Providence that has sent you. Here have I been trying over and

over again to arrange my basket of daisies; I can never do anything with these wild flowers. You must see to them—here, take them. There, there, you may have them all."

And as she spoke she threw armfuls of daisies over Mélie, till the latter's beautiful black apron and shoulders and cap were covered with them. The latter gathered them up into bunches, and then, with a taste and decision that bespoke the skilled worker, after cutting the stalks with a knife to the required length, she quickly stuck them one by one in the sand of a flower-stand. It did not take long to arrange the white and gold blossoms till they curved prettily down to an encircling border of dark green. Marthe on her side, now occupied with flowers from the hot-houses or from the garden shrubs, was succeeding wonderfully, the effect of her clusters being heavier and richer, with less of quiet grace about them. She was happy in her grouping. Here the flowers drooped in elegant abandonment, here an aigrette rose above a dome of blossoms, and all the while, as she stepped backward and forward to examine the effect of her handiwork, she was calling upon Mélie to give her opinion. There was, therefore, not much opportunity for conversation between the girls, of which Mélie was glad. She had just summoned up courage enough to be there, and to arrange the flowers, without talking, for all the while she was thinking of him. She could not all at once rid herself of that importunate sense of recent trouble, of which we are all in turn the victims, and which invades the very thoughts by

which we had hoped to escape it, turning and quickening them in some unexpected manner, so as to add to our torture. The most commonplace remarks renewed her sorrow. If Marthe said: "We had a storm while we were travelling, did you have one here?" Mélie recalled her beautiful dream, her awakening from it, the haunting song of the rain as it ran down the roof—"They will flower the better." Lies! lies!

A bright, ringing voice threw an order to a servant outside, and when Mélie heard this voice and the sound of an alert foot coming up the garden-steps, she turned as white as her daisies. Madeleine Laubriet entered the room. As Mélie watched her walk up to the table she felt too dazed to give a word or sign of recognition. What queenly elegance! How well the sailor-blue dress suited her! How proudly the head rose above the soft round of the collar! Unhappy Mélie, the weaver! What is your attraction in comparison to hers? Come what may, do what you will, the man who has loved her can never love you. See now how she advances toward you with that patronizing air which she assumed the moment she saw you, obeying an instinct of birth and of superior education.

"Why, your basket is quite a work of art, Mélie! And I am so clumsy at this kind of thing! How do you do it?"

Mélie conquered her agitation, and only a slight unsteadiness of voice betrayed the conflict that was taking place within her. She answered with a word or two without leaving off her work.

Madeleine, with her delicate fingers, began feeling about among the scattered flowers, seeking for a piece of Spanish jasmine, which was her favourite blossom. After a minute or two she said:

"What dress are you going to put on this evening, Marthe?"

Marthe understood that this question meant, "What do you advise me to put on? I want to look my best," and answered accordingly: "Your pink dress."

"You think so?"

"It suits you well."

"But there will not be many at dinner."

"What does that matter. Is it not a dress celebrated by the poets?"

"Marthe!"

"It is truly sung by the poets, by Monsieur Noellet of Fief-Sauvin, now contributor to the *Don Juan*. You must know, Mélie, that my father has invited him several times to his house. He is not the same Pierre Noellet that you used to know. He is really very clever, is he not, Madeleine?"

"Yes, tolerably so."

"I think him very clever. Anyhow, he can write pretty good poetry, and his last sonnet, printed in a little magazine for beginners, was 'On a Pink Dress.' 'The material it was made of was as soft as a cloud,' and so on, and so on. I fancy, Madeleine, that he went on to compare it with the dawn."

"Very likely."

"Which was a novel idea, anyhow," continued

Marthe, laughing, "and that is why I advise you to put it on."

"If it pleases Pierre Noellet," said Madeleine haughtily, somewhat piqued, "to express his gratitude for the hospitality of our house in rhyme, I certainly cannot prevent him. By-the-by, what did I hear this morning about his coming here to see Jacques, and that there was a further scene between him and his father? You ought to know something about it, Mélie."

She threw aside the branch of jasmine she had been pulling to pieces as she talked, and turned toward Mélie; then, with an exclamation of alarm, she cried:

"What is the matter?"

The weaver was lying back in her chair almost unconscious, her eyes fixed on Madeleine with an expression on her face of agonized suffering.

"I cut myself," she said in a weak voice.

A thin stream of blood was, in fact, trickling from her hand, which hung limply beside her, and the dark stain against the hand, which was whiter than marble, looked alarming.

Madeleine ran into the adjoining room, and came back with a surgical case and some lint; and, having staunched the blood, she bandaged the wounded finger, Mélie meanwhile not stirring. The wound was not a deep one, and Mélie did not generally lose her courage and spirit in this way. What could have come over her? Madeleine—now a woman, and seeking a woman's reason to account for things, drew back and looking scrutinizingly at Mélie—asked herself why the girl,

who was always so gentle and respectful, had that fixed look on her face of mutinous and agitated feeling.

Mélie soon recovered, and a slight colour returned to her cheeks.

"Why, how sensitive we are," said Marthe, "to fall into a state of collapse like that for a cut finger! Well, let us go on with our work; there is nothing to make a fuss about."

But Madeleine immediately took her up:

"On the contrary, do you not see that she is in need of rest. Go, Mélie, go, you are not in a condition to help us any more to-day."

Mélie rose, and left the room like one bewildered.

She made haste across the park, eager to reach her home, and once inside, instead of waiting to take off the fine apron, which she, poor girl, had put on to go to Landehue, she went straight down to the cellar, to be near her weaving-machine, the only friend she had left. "Pierre Noellet, Pierre Noellet," she kept on saying to herself, "for whom have you forsaken me? You suspected that she did not love you; I am certain of it from her look, her manner, her words. Will she ever love you? Will you succeed in rising to her level? Will you be able to cross the immense distance which separates you? What delusions, what dangers are you, may be, running to meet? Pierre Noellet, Pierre Noellet, if you had only wished!" and so great was her love for him that she ended by pitying him. The old, maternal affectionate pity that she had had for Abbé Heurtebise's pupil was re-

awakened and troubled as she now thought of him; all other feeling was dead. Dead the dreams of love, dead the selfish desire for happiness! Mélie was no longer crying; all her anger and envy had passed away. All that she was conscious of at present was of an extreme lassitude and a hideous sense of loneliness, such as the survivors on a field of battle feel when the remains of what were once men, horses, arms, and harvest-fields lie sleeping round them in the light of the moon. Everything was over for ever. She had understood that when she saw Madeleine Laubriet.

And a second time her energetic will called to her, and Mélie answered: "I will forgive. I will try to forget. I must not go any more to Landehue, or among my friends, for they will see that I am in trouble. I will remain here. I will be very gentle with every one, but I will not again open my heart to another. I shall never marry. I shall behave as if I were a widow."

CHAPTER XVIII.

It is, alas! a common fault with humanity to mistake misfortune for crime, and Mélie Rainette experienced the truth of this. The imprudence of which she had been guilty in taking Pierre Noellet into her house, their walk back together from Fief-Sauvin to La Genivière, the farmer's anger, and Jacques' unaccountable fainting-fit, were all matters discussed and commented upon under every roof in Fief-Sauvin. Powerless to defend herself, and not even fully aware of all the calumnies directed against her, she was yet conscious of being surrounded by an insulting and mocking curiosity. Many of the town matrons cried out at the scandal and shut their doors against her, and the girls of her own age, weavers like herself and old friends, ostentatiously avoided her. It did not take many days before Mélie, who had been forsaken by Pierre, knew also what it was to be forsaken by the world.

It was a cruel trial for her, the attitude of the Noellets being the hardest thing she had to bear. When she met them, they would appear not even to see her. They walked on, sad of countenance, the farmer without lifting his hat, the mother and daughters without a sign of recognition to this girl, who but so lately had been like one of the family at La Genivière. Accomplice of the un-

grateful and rebellious son, she, like him, had lost her place by their fireside. She was not even treated like a stranger. The old friendship, which had for so long protected and sustained her, was now turned against her, and by its very silence, left her a victim to the evil tongues of the neighbourhood.

It cost her an effort to have to ask for news of La Genivière from those who cared little about the farmer and his family, and to have to gather from them particulars which she could have given them in other days. She inquired daily after Jacques, and heard that he was growing worse. She longed to run and sit by his bedside, and to help Antoinette and Marie in their care of Pierre's best friend. But even this act of devotion was forbidden her.

One day on her way home from church she met Abbé Heurtebise, who stopped her.

"Mélie," he said, "I have just come from him; he cannot live through the day."

"Monsieur le Curé," she answered, "it is not possible for me to go, I suppose?"

He shook his head, and she continued on her way humiliated and in tears. After reaching home, she remained for an hour in the garden looking toward the distant oaks of La Genivière.

In the room just quitted by Abbé Heurtebise, and on the bed where the farmer and his wife usually slept, Jacques indeed lay dying.

His interview with the priest had brought him a momentary calmness, and one knows not what grandeur of understanding to his soul. Some conception of that which was a waiting him on the

farther side of life had come to him, for his face had been illuminated and as it were transfigured by the nobility of its expression. What did his eyes see as he gazed toward the open window? His kneeling sisters, his mother drooping with fatigue, but still holding his hand in hers? The vine-tendrils that hung down over the opening from the trellis above, against the blue light beyond? The white curtains that swayed in the wind with the sound of a bird taking flight? The little tree in front of it, from which still fluttered the remains of a kite, a relic of long past days? No. His vision travelled far beyond these things. He saw death, but he saw it without fear, for he smiled. Peace, a certainty of hope, a joy in which the soul alone had part, something apart from and superior to life, these could be read upon his face on which death also had written, "I am here."

A terrible oppression overcame him, and the anguish of it gave him strength to raise himself in bed. His mother had already risen, and was supporting him, gently laying him down again as the fit subsided. And now he lay with his eyes shut, once more conscious only of his suffering. And so the hours went by, slowly, slowly, the seconds marked by the heavy breathing, which grew more and more laboured.

Some neighbours of the town had come to watch with the Noellets. There were at least fifteen persons in the room all on their knees round the bed, as round an altar, watching for the coming of the one who holds universal and sovereign command over men, with a commiseration that

was mingled with self-pity, as their thoughts reverted to themselves. When one among them rose, the others followed her with their eyes, and there was a rattling of rosaries through the silent room. At intervals, Julien Noellet, who stood like a gray granite figure at the head of the bed, opened an old book with a warped cover, the same that he had regularly opened every evening for forty years, and without any preliminary, read aloud a psalm or a prayer, his voice only slightly less firm than usual. A murmur of voices of all ages made response; then suddenly one of the voices would cease, choked with tears, and only two or three were able to finish the responses in which they had all at first joined.

It was toward four o'clock when Jacques lifted his hand, now quite cold, which had been lying stretched out beside him on the sheet; as he did so he half opened his eyes, and looked round with an expression of deep and questioning anxiety in them as if seeking for some one, a look as from one beyond the grave who sees before him the spaces of infinity.

"What is it, my Jacques?" asked his mother.

He seemed to hear her, for his lips moved, and he whispered:

"My brother, the abbé, where is he?"

Jacques drew another breath. Then, all at once, the breathing ceased, the sheet rose with his last struggling effort, the spark of life died out of the face, and a bluish pallor overspread the body from head to foot.

Tears and lamentation now arose from the neigh-

bours and from Jacques' sisters. The mingled sound of their shrill cries was carried through the windows and announced to those afar that Jacques was dead, while the father and mother, silent and immovable, watched their son's face growing dignified in death, as it gradually reassumed the supernatural expression they had already seen upon it that morning.

CHAPTER XIX.

Two days after the neighbours from the surrounding farms repaired again at an early hour to La Genivière. The women, clad in their black hoods and looking like nuns, passed through the first room, which was left open, into the second room, generally so light and bright, but now closed and filled with their sombre figures, and there knelt in prayer. In the centre, resting on two chairs, was the coffin, covered with a white cloth, on which had been placed a bunch of flowers gathered that morning by Antoinette, and a sprig of rosemary lying in a saucer filled with holy water. The draught from the door blew aside the flames of the two candles placed on the floor to right and left of the coffin, and the light from these hardly served to show the way through the gloom, so dimly they seemed to burn amid these dark dresses and cloaks. The relations from Montrevault and from other towns of Vendée were also there, numbering among them some of the female cousins that one sees only at weddings and funerals. They were all weeping, some with such heavy sighs and sobs that they could be heard by the men who were waiting outside in the courtyard.

The latter, more self-contained, as became the heads of families, were grouped in front of the house, chatting about the wheat, the silvery gray

ears of which could be seen near the mill of Haute-Brune. They foretold what the weather would be at the end of the summer, not all of them being of the same mind about it, and talked of other similar subjects, but with the gravity due to the thought of the mourning which had brought them together.

Death was held in respect by these peasants, and Jacques, only a poor little soldier and the least among them, had true mourners among these distant relatives. They gave him tears, and genuine grief and the pity whose weeping is a prayer.

With them, standing nearest to the threshold, was the farmer. From time to time a fresh vehicle arrived filled with relatives in mourning attire. Some of the men went forward to shake hands, or to unharness the horse and find it a place under the shed, while the new-comers went up to the head of the family and accosted him in the ceremonious manner and with the stereotyped greetings that are considered the polite thing among the Vendéeans.

"Good-day, cousin, how are you?"

"Thank you, I am quite well."

"And, my cousin, your wife, how is she?"

"Quite well, also, thank God."

"And my cousins, your daughters, and the rest of your household, how are they all?"

The farmer continued to answer, and went through the same category of questions on his side, inquiring after the health of his male and female cousins, and "everybody at home." It was only when this exchange of greetings was over that the women retired into the house, the

men joining one or other of the groups assembled in the courtyard.

When eight o'clock sounded he made a sign to two young farmer friends from Renaudière and the Grande Ecorcière, who went into the shed and brought out a stout ash-pole. Going into the room where the sobs of the women were growing louder, they slung the coffin on it by means of two cords. Then, lifting the burden to the level of their shoulder, they carried it through the adjoining room, in which Jacques had slept all his life, and out of the house and through the courtyard toward the road. As they passed the stable the horses grew excited and neighed. How often he had driven them! The trees spread their branches overhead as the procession passed along —oaks and elms, cherry-trees, their green fruit, swollen with sap, glancing in the spring sunshine, apple-trees in full blossom shedding a pink and white foam on the path below. The fields of flax bent to the mourners; the fields of wheat and barley shook their heads. Not a bird was to be seen.

Death was passing that way. The carriers paused as they came to a cross-path, and put the coffin down on the grass, which made the strained cords creak over the ash-pole. The train of mourners paused also, and one of the relatives, who was carrying three or four little crosses of thin chestnut-wood about a foot long, stuck one in the ground at the angle formed by two banks, among other crosses left by the dead of the year before. They were there to say to the passers-by, "You who come from the same corners of the

Bocage, as you lead your beasts to pasture or bring home your ploughs, pray, good people whom I have known, pray for Jacques Noellet, one of yourselves, who has travelled along the road which you, too, will follow some day to his last resting-place, borne on the shoulders of two ploughmen of Fief-Sauvin. Good people, make haste, and do not forget me as long as these two slips of chestnut-wood, which are planted here in memory of my last journey, remain undestroyed by the earth and rain."

Then the procession went forward again, winding across the warm and agitated country.

O fathers, O fair-haired Kelts, it was thus you carried your dead, slung from a branch of the forest, to the green mound where they were to take their rest. It was thus in a mournful band that you bore them along your ways. The cries of your women, covered with their veils; the bold, hard-featured heads and faces and long hair of your men; your primitive natures, with their violent passions wholly given up to pleasure or to grief. Nothing has changed. Here were the same customs, the same appurtenances. You lived again in these sons and daughters, even in the inanimate things. Your bones were mingled with the dust which they disturbed. Your blood that had become sap was swelling the ears of corn. In the full-blown periwinkles beside the ditches there was seen something of the blue of your virgins' eyes. There were eyes, too, in the clear drops that hung from the tips of the branches. Shuddering breaths of wind blew past like voices—voices that

could no longer speak, but still wept on. The earth, the grass, the dew, the wayside flowers, all this matter that had once had human form and stirred the human heart gathered sorrowing around Jacques' coffin and enveloped him with its wailing.

The bell began to toll. At that moment Jacques passed for the last time and forever over the boundary of the land where he had been born; La Genivière was lost to view; close by rose the new church, with its open-work spire, where the silhouette of the bell-ringer could be seen keeping time with his swaying figure.

When at last, the long service in the church being over, the body was carried into the churchyard and let down into the grave, the yellow clay from which lay around hiding the green grass, and the final prayer of the priest had consigned it to the grave-digger, fresh weeping arose, and for a last time the thought of Jacques crossed the minds of many there who had come out of civility or sympathy. Then the crowd dispersed and became scattered about the churchyard. Friends sought one another among the tombs. The tie that had temporarily bound these men and women together was broken. Families reformed preparatory to returning home, and gradually disappeared in different directions, already back again in the world of life, and experiencing an inexpressible pleasure in talking, in walking at a natural pace, in forgetting the dead on whom the heavy soft earth was now falling.

The Noellets were the last to leave the church-

yard. The farmer and his wife kept side by side, having no part in the murmur and rustle of talk and movement around them. They were alone, for their children had gone on in front, and so deeply plunged in thought of the one from whom they had just parted that they had no eyes or ears for anybody or anything. Again the mother held him as an infant in her arms, as in those first years of married life that have such sweet burdens to bear. He was really a beautiful child and very strong; he was always ready to laugh. As for Julien, he thought of the strong young ploughman that he had grown into at first, and then of the shrunken face of the little soldier who had come home from the barracks in a coat that had grown too large for him. In low voices, and in a few quickly spoken words, the two resigned ones exchanged their heart-broken thoughts. And Pierre? Both of them perhaps were thinking of him, but his name did not pass their lips.

CHAPTER XX.

THE sun had hardly risen when Julien Noellet's voice was heard calling to the farm-servant who slept over the bakehouse, and ordering him to make haste and yoke the large pair of oxen. The man was astonished, for in the month of May the ploughing is long over and the carting not begun, and as for going to the fair, independent of the fact that the farmer no longer attended them with his former regularity, there had been no question about it the night before. And the sale of a pair of oxen—especially of such a pair as that—is a grave matter, requiring long thought and deliberation. The farmer had never even spoken of such a thing. Why, then, did he want them yoked? So the farm-servant reasoned with himself as he hastily dressed, and still half asleep went down the ladder which led up to his room.

He found the farmer standing with his arms crossed on the paved footway which ran down the middle of the cowshed, contemplating his six plough-oxen, who were turning their heads toward him with short impatient lowings, asking for their morning meal. Julien Noellet looked gloomy, but then that was not unusual in these days. The farm-servant did not dare to question him. He took down the yoke made of polished service wood, and placed it on the necks of the two finest oxen,

Vermais and Fauveau, who were spotted white and red, high in the back and broad of flank, and as he was strapping the wood to the horns, he noticed a tear trickling down the farmer's hollow cheek. When he had finished twining the leathern strap he unhooked the goad, and stood waiting, leaning against Vermais' immense shoulder. Julien sighed:

"Look at them well, my good lad," he said. "You will not often have such fine beasts as that to yoke, live as long as you may."

"That is very likely," the man replied.

"They make a splendid pair," the farmer continued; "the same colour and the same age. Vermais, perhaps, is a little the stronger of the two. I have never known them refuse to draw, never known them ill, although they have known some very tough days' work."

"You may well say so, master."

"Not that I despise the others; Chauvin and Rougeais are good beasts, too; Caille and Nobiais will do their work as well as the others when they are older; but those two I was really fond of."

"Are you going to sell them, then," asked the man, "as you speak of them with such regret?"

"I am going to do as I please," replied the farmer curtly. "Lead them out on to the road."

The servant put a smock on over his clothes, for it was drizzling, and drove out the oxen. After all, what did it matter to him? To sell this pair of oxen, or buy another, to be here or there, follow along the road, or mow, it was all only a matter of obeying and earning one's living. His

broad face, which had for a moment shown a look of surprise, soon resumed its natural placidity of expression. Without further word or thought he began to keep pace with his beasts, whose heads were above his own, whistling two little notes which they knew well, to encourage them.

The farmer followed behind, leaning on his red thorn stick, which was fastened to his wrist by a thin leather thong. He kept his eyes down on the ground, only lifting them occasionally, and then as he looked at the tawny croups of his favourite beasts, at their well-marked coats, their muzzles swaying from right to left to the rhythm of their gait, while their breaths rose like white smoke in the frosty morning air, he heaved a deep sigh. He recalled the hours of heavy ploughing he had shared with Vermais and Fauveau, the day when he had bought them, with Jacques, at the fair of Sainte-Christine, and all the opportunities he had been given of selling them at great profit. But he had cared for them too much to part with them. His great delight had been to see his full complement of oxen, the six of them, yoked together. Perhaps he was being punished for the pride he had felt in them. To sell them, and not buy others to take their place, what a disgrace! What pain to follow step by step like this, while the wealth of La Genivière was slowly departing! And what had brought it about? The same cause, always the same.

The farmers from Fief-Sauvin and the farther districts greeted him as they trotted past on their way to the fair at Beaupréau; the sellers of eggs

and poultry put their heads out from under the cover of their carts, where they sat among their baskets; messengers passing lifted their hats. He made no response; did not even raise his eyes.

He continued to brood over his misfortune. The very morning of Jacques' death, he had had a letter from Paris. This time Pierre had not sent a letter to either his mother or sisters. To his father he wrote as follows:

"You owe me a sum of money which you are unjustly keeping from me. Seven months ago I sent to claim it. I have not received a word in reply. I can wait no longer. My creditor knows that you have money owing to me. And if I have not paid him fifteen hundred francs before a week is out, he will take proceedings against you. I have no power to prevent him."

At first he had flown into a rage, and had declared that he would pay nothing, that he had spent more on his son than the money left by his uncle was worth, and that he had nothing over from it. Years before the fifteen hundred francs had been invested in the farm, and to recover it he would be forced to sell his beasts or his timber, to become poorer, to still further deprive himself. No, he would rather that the threat should be carried out. He would see if this unworthy son would dare to go as far as to proceed against him, and to drag him into court. For twenty-four hours Julien Noellet stuck to his resolution, but on further reflection he had given in, for, after all, he owed this part of the inheritance. He then

made up his mind to part with Vermais and Fauveau in order to pay Pierre's debts. And now he was taking his good beasts to be sold. It was a profound humiliation to him to feel himself conquered by his son, to be constrained to obey the law, a second-rate power in his eyes, which had hitherto been subordinated to his domestic authority.

They had reached the foot of a little hill that rises near Beaupréau. Vermais and Fauveau mounted the incline with their same firm and even gait. He looked at them again as the rising sun shone upon them, superb creatures, ruddy as ripe chestnuts, and thought to himself: "It is better for Jacques to have died; he would have felt it too much."

Then, aware that he was nearing Beaupréau, he drew his short pipe out of his pocket and lighted it, as he was accustomed to do whenever he entered the town, anxious to appear as usual. The farm-servant, pleased to catch sight of the roofs against the brightening sky, and being free from care of all kind, began to sing. Noellet went forward, and the two men entered Beaupréau walking on either side of the oxen.

The streets were full of blue blouses and white caps, all making their way to the market-place.

The crowds, with the regular flow of running water, were streaming from all sides into the sloping field, adding their numbers to the men and animals already collected on the spot in such swarms that the yellow clay of the soil was no longer visible. The fresh arrivals joined the mass,

causing a momentary eddy, stood still, and became lost among their fellows.

The farm-servant from La Genivière did the same when his turn came. Seizing Vermais by one of its horns, he whistled softly to quiet the beasts as he urged them forward. They had not gone far before a stout dealer from La Villette made a sign to Julien Noellet, and the servant, laying his goad athwart, brought his beasts to a standstill. It was not the first time that Julien Noellet had sold his oxen for slaughter. As a rule he never gave a thought to the fate that was awaiting them; but to-day he saw in imagination the mallet of the slaughterer fall on the white star which both Vermais and Fauveau wore on their foreheads, and just as the sale was being concluded, he hesitated, and asked:

"Do you want them for killing?"

"Certainly not for anything else," said the dealer, laughing. "Did you think I bought your oxen to keep them in clover?"

There was nothing for it but to resign himself. Julien clapped hands with the buyer, and turning to the servant, said:

"You hear; in two hours' time you are to give them up at the nearer end of the Route du Pin. After that you can go about your own business, if you have any. Here are forty sous for your expenses."

The man could hardly believe that his master had sold his two oxen without buying others, and was astonished at being dismissed so early in the day. He stood still, staring, as if expecting a

sequel of some kind to this order, which was evidently incomplete.

"Touch up your beasts, you confounded boy, and don't stand gaping at me like that!" exclaimed the farmer, in a tone of voice which put an end to all doubt on the part of the man.

And with this he turned abruptly out of the field, taking the butcher with him, so that the bargain might be concluded and the money handed over in the public house, the while his two big oxen, with lowered horns, were being driven through the crowd in the opposite direction.

Julien Noellet was no drinker. As a rule he only looked into the public houses for a minute or two. To-day he lingered, first with the butcher who had bought his oxen, then with the farmers, who came from all the parishes of the Mauges, and with whom, as a rule, he only exchanged nods on the rare occasions of meeting. He treated them to drinks, and, for no purpose of business, conversed a good deal and in a loud voice with each in turn, continuing to sit on in the same place after he had breakfasted. The older men from Fief and Villeneuve, seeing the farmer, who was generally so taciturn and sober among those of his kind, thus drinking and smoking without moving from his seat, said to each other: "Can you believe it is the same man? Since his son's death one would scarcely know him again."

The master of La Genivière had in truth much to trouble him, and he drank to forget it.

It was nearing sunset before he left the public house, and then, instead of taking the road to Fife-

Sauvin, he went to the notary, who had his house in the centre of the town. He was not drunk, but he began to feel a heaviness in his head and an unsteadiness in his legs.

At the sight of the professional brass-plate, however, he drew himself together.

"I have brought some money," he said, the moment he entered the office with its striped green and black walls, through which so many of his kind had passed during the day.

"Money, Maître Noellet, and what for?"

"To send away."

"Why, now, I never knew you to have debts to pay."

"It is the sons who make them," replied the farmer.

Without vouchsafing further information, he took out his leather purse and counted out the louis d'or one by one, placing them on the desk in piles of five, counting over each pile more than once, as if mistrusting his calculation. When he came to the seventh he paused, and said solemnly, "That's for Vermais."

Then he started counting again. At the fourteenth he said again, "That is for Fauveau."

When at last the fifteen hundred francs, slowly drawn out of the old purse and slowly deposited by the farmer, were lying in fifteen little piles of gold on the faded mahogany of the desk:

"There is the whole sum left by Uncle Thomas of Montrevault," he added, as a concluding remark.

"I remember that affair," said the notary; "the legacy was left to your son."

"Yes."

"And it is to him the money is to be sent?"

"Yes, but I wish you to write to him at the same time."

"That will be quite easy, Noellet, quite easy. What am I to say to him?"

"You will tell him from me that, now he is paid, we have nothing more to do with each other—nothing, do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"You will also tell him that I have forbidden his mother and sisters to write to him, and that neither I, nor any of my household, will henceforth receive letters from him."

The notary, who was a conciliatory man, replied:

"You are giving me a commission, Maître Noellet, which is, I must say——"

"You refuse to undertake it?" interrupted the farmer.

"I know your son misled you——"

"You refuse?" repeated Julien Noellet, putting out his hand to take back the money.

"If you really insist upon it."

"Well, then, write as I wish: the reasons for so doing are my business; I am the father, you understand."

The notary knew his Vendéeans well. He accompanied his client to the door without attempting any more objections.

Julien Noellet wound the strap of his stick round his wrist, passed through a few streets, and then

started to return home in the mild evening air along the Fief-Sauvin road.

He walked quickly, with long strides. It was just the hour when the last farmers and dealers were driving home in their carts with their wives, children and purchases. On seeing Julien they all in turn slackened their horses' speed, and offered to take him up. But he refused; his blood felt on fire, and he hoped the walk would calm him.

"No," he said once more.

"Is it true that you have sold your big oxen?"

"Yes."

"And you have not bought any others, I suppose, as you are walking home like that?"

This question repeated over and over again exasperated the peasant.

Just before he reached the mill at Haute-Brune, he turned off the main road to avoid further meetings. His intention was to return to La Genivière by way of the fields. It was growing dark, and night had already invaded the valley. The heights to the right and left still kept a point of light here and there, and a last field of wheat, a clump of trees, caught the rays of the sinking sun. But soon the last spark had vanished, and the mists from the neighbouring ponds added to the darkness that surrounded the peasant.

He had hardly left the mill a hundred yards or so behind him, and was still within hearing of the plunging sails, when he suddenly stopped, overcome with amazement and fear. Seated on one of the large gray boulders that had fallen into the middle of the River Evre, the waters of which

flowed gurgling round it, was an old man with his legs hanging over the stream. Perhaps it was only the miller looking after his eel-lines. But there were certain things about him by which Noellet seemed to recognize his grandfather, who had been dead twenty-seven years, one of the rough simple-minded men of the old times. There was no possibility of doubt about it. It was the man over again, with his snow-white hair, his short-skirted jacket, his brown gaiters up to his knees, and even the familiar movement of his head, which he would thrust forward if asked to recall some past event. For he had been all through the great war of 1793, this grandfather, and had lived among the furze, and been on the march day and night; he had been twice wounded, had crossed the Loire with the routed army, had seen, known, and suffered everything; he could tell long tales about it all at night. And why had he come back? How had he got there, just in his grandson's path, appearing at the usual distance of these phantoms of the dark, who are never either near or far. Julien was so afraid that he would ask after Pierre, that he stopped and slunk away toward the willow-hedge which ran to his left alongside the field. When about twenty paces from it, however, he heard a voice from across the river, and the sprouting willows calling out: "Are you in a great hurry, Julien?"

Respect and fear held him rooted to the spot. Never in his life had he addressed his grandfather without taking off his hat. He uncovered and waited. There was a singing in his ears as if all

the grasshoppers of the field were inside his head. The voice continued:

"You have sold the oxen, Julien, and you have not bought any others to replace them. Were they too dear?"

He could hear the words distinctly, but he could only distinguish an indistinct form on account of the distance and the mist that the wind was driving between him and the river. He answered:

"No, grandfather, they were not too dear. I sold the oxen to pay my son's debts."

"Your two finest?"

"Yes, that they were!"

The voice sounded deeper as it went on:

"It is a great pity, my poor Julien, about the children nowadays; we behaved better in the old times, the old times, the old times." And echoes seemed to come from all sides—the woods, the river-creeks; the hillsides buried in shadow repeated, "Old times; old times."

And the farmer saw a regiment of soldiers in white uniforms and with cockades in their hats suddenly rise into view. A pale light was shed above them by the barrels of their rifles and their uplifted scythes. They were marching to the assault of an immense rampart that could be seen down there in the dark night. The grandfathe was leading them. The earth shook beneath thei heavy shoes, the bushes cracked, the reeds were trampled by the river-side as the column marched on in serried ranks. Julien recognized nearly all of them, for he had known them in his youth, these honoured veterans, men of a day now past, the

remains of the glorious old Vendée. They recognized him, too, and whispered something to each other which he could not hear, with a glance of pity toward him. They marched past him, as if swept along by the storm, so rapidly did they advance, while the grandfather, still at their head a long way off, continued to look toward the spot where Julien had remained standing, his feet in the high grass, the dark fields all around him, weeping for shame.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE end of the summer had come, the season when the oppressive heat of the sun remains intense to the hour of its setting, and when thousands of different insects creep into the cracks of the earth, and are heard humming. The grasses cracked, the berries dropped from the wild creepers. Hardly a flower was left, for the flowers had perished in the furnace of heat in which the grain had ripened. In place of their vanished scents, the evening air was filled with the floating perfume of the harvest. Barley, oats, wheat, all were cut. The beautiful, trembling ears of corn had ceased to laugh and chatter among themselves; they were lying low, some gathered into sheaves, with their heads turned one to the other in the close embrace of death, others already in the barn. For many, many days the labourers, women as well as men, had been mowing with all their might, bathed in sweat, penetrating to the depths of some tawny square. At last it was over. The earth had given of her fruits, and lay naked and empty, leaving her stubble-fields to the turtle-doves, who shared the gleaning with the poor women, and, like them, sought along the deep furrows pursued by the cries from the famishing nest. The threshing had been started in all directions. Beyond the trees could be heard the distant throbbing of the

machine, as its mournful roar swelled and fell, telling abroad all the lugubrious history of the grain from stage to stage, as it was pushed, pressed, twisted, and separated, even as we are, the grain to one side, the chaff to the other.

At La Genivière the threshing went on from early dawn till evening, and the people of the valley, or of Fief and Villeneuve, or those dwelling on the opposite slopes, said to each other: "It is four o'clock; they are beginning the day's work over at La Genivière; they are stopping, it is noon." Then "they are starting again; it must be two o'clock." Under the August sun, which sent the blood running like fire through the veins, in the thick of the dust that bronzed their necks, the helpers who had come from all parts at the summons from Noellet, thronged the threshing-floor. There were relatives, neighbouring farmers, servants, and even friends who had nothing to do with harvesting, among the latter being the little tailor and the two Fauvêpres; for at such times of entertainment and hurry, every one is ready to lend a hand and to turn farmer for the nonce.

A stream of ruddy grain poured from the threshing-machine. Life was hidden in it, and life gave it greeting and multiplied around it. Women, busy with rakes, raked up the grain; four horses harnessed to the poles of the pivot went round and round; men passed and re-passed, carrying away the straw or bringing fresh sheaves at the end of their blue steel reaping-hooks; some were occupied with destroying, layer by layer, the huge piles of sheaves, while others, up to their knees

in the new golden straw, rose with the growing stack; the little mill, with its ceaseless clack, sent the husk flying out in a curve, like a comet's tail; above them all, the machine with its cogged wheels and its fly-wheels, continued to turn, the sound of voices and laughter, and of the neighing of the horses excited by the whip, being lost in its rumbling clamour. Everywhere was joy, everywhere the intoxication of sound and movement.

One man alone, in the midst of the universal excitement, remained impassive: that man was Julien. Standing in his place as master, near the gaping jaws awaiting to grind the gathered grain, he received the sheaves, untied them with a turn of the hand, and pushed them, with the ears forward, up the inclined plain. The dust had covered him from head to foot, and even his hair was white. No glimmer of light came into his sad eyes as he looked up. He went through his task, finding no pleasure in it, as one whose thoughts are elsewhere. So absent-minded was he, that at moments he forgot to feed the machine, and remained without moving with his head fallen on to his sunken chest. The threshers knew what had happened by the sound of the cylinders, revolving empty, and those around him cast compassionate, sidelong glances at the farmer of La Genivière. They did not stop working, but for a minute or two the joy of the threshing-floor was interrupted.

PART THE THIRD.

CHAPTER XXII.

To Monsieur Chabersot, Officer of Public Instruction, Honorary Professor of the University of Fontainebleau.

PARIS,
June 10th, 188—.

MY DEAR MASTER AND FRIEND,

It will soon be nearly two months since you left Paris and retired from duty, and yet, as you complain, I have not yet sent you the beginning of the private journal which I promised. Lay the blame on the laborious life I lead, on the overpowering heat, on my trouble at Jacques' death, on anything rather than on my forgetfulness. Believe me when I say, that I have not for one moment forgotten you. On the contrary, not a day passes but I look for you and regret your absence. Your near presence was precious to me; you were an adviser, and a strength to which I could always look for help. You saved me literally from starvation. As long as I exist, I can never forget our first meeting on that winter evening, on the landing outside our rooms, perched up near the sky,

where I lived, and still continue to live, on the Quai du Louvre. You, too, may remember it, but not certainly with that exactness of detail which leaves behind a feeling of comforted sadness. And what suffering I was in! I had just returned from a fruitless tramp from place to place, begging in vain for one of the cheap posts as an office-assistant which the hungry struggle to obtain; I was living on the money lent me by Loutrel, and, with my mind on the rack, working for a doubtful degree. I saw the future, which I had thought held such prospect for me, closing in upon me, dark and stifling. There was blacker night at my heart even than in the narrow house up which I was climbing. Just as I had reached the door of my room a figure issued from the one opposite. I knocked against it. We looked at one another. At the first glance I saw that I had to do with a man of pleasant temper. He was not angry at my clumsiness. He held a candle in his hand, the light from which flickered over his bald forehead. My neighbour appeared to me very tall and very old, with his short, round, snow-white beard, and, above all, very kindly, for instead of answering my stammered excuses, he looked at me, and guessed all my hidden agony, my desolation, and the need I was in of assistance. Any other man would, after a moment of barren sympathy, have passed on and left me. This one stopped to question me, and for a quarter of an hour kept me under the fire of his candle and of his professional eye, and when he understood that I was wishing to devote myself to letters, and that I was working

up for my degree by myself and under discouragement, he said with the best smile that had been given me by any one outside my family, "We shall see more of each other, my young friend."

And, in truth, my dear master, we did see each other again, every day and for many hours a day. You resumed with me the work of teacher which you had elsewhere given up; you poured out for me all your treasures of scientific knowledge, of patience, and of severity. In the simplicity of my heart, I believed that you were preparing me for my degree; it was, however, the journalist that you were arming. Your practical common-sense soon convinced me of the vanity of my scholarly ambitions. A Master of Arts! A doctor! And I in need of bread! The longing for these titles passed away when you said to me one day:

"Write an article!"

"On what?"

"On the book that has just appeared."

"But, Monsieur, it is by one of the Members of the Institute."

"The more reason you should write."

"What will you do with it?"

"Never mind; write."

The article being finished, corrected, and thanks to you, accepted by a first-class paper that had its officers near the Quai du Louvre, do you remember, how, with the eager longing of a shipwrecked man, I watched each day for my two initials, as for the sails of the vessel that was to bear me into harbour? That first article, once published, others followed. And then, when you thought that my powers had

been sufficiently and satisfactorily tested, the same friend who had already done so much for me, negotiated for my engagement on the *Don Juan*.

And then I, shy and timid as I was, I who till then had kept from you the secret of my life, made a full confession. How many hours did it last, that walk along the avenue of the Champs-Elysées, under the chestnut-trees with their pyramid-like blossoms already pointing upward, like little pink and white fir-trees, in the warm, spring sunshine?

How many? As many as it took to tell all my tale. You listened with the untiring patience of those who love. You scolded me gently, not too harshly, for fear I should lose my trust in you. You acted as my father would have acted, I am sure, if he could have understood a confession of this kind from me. Poor, cherished secret, known only to one other besides you, to Mélie Rainette, the weaver of Fief-Sauvin, a countrywoman of mine, who wears a brave heart under her white linen bodice. When, in the long talks we had together, as I walked beside you, I told you of it, you used to shake your head. "Madness," you would say, "madness." But you were not cruel enough to crush my hopes with a discouraging word.

Give me leave, then, to speak to you about it again. The more I think about this love that has taken possession of me, the more I feel that it is unlike any other. Young men of family, as they call themselves, who are born among the surroundings that suffice them, know nothing of this youthful ambition which made me separate myself from

my own. They have only to live and to let life carry them along; their youth is untroubled by strife or dissimulation; they enjoy it to the full, and while still young their path in life is settled for them, and they know what is to be their destiny, what money they will have, and in what style they will be able to live; then they begin to look round to see who shall share the fortune they now enjoy. They reflect carefully before making their choice. But I! I was born at her feet, on the land that was impregnated with her name, and that spoke of it to me, coupled with that of my parents; her house, her woods, her fields were the first horizon that I knew; and she herself first awakened my admiration and my sense of a way of life differing from that at La Genivière. Through her I had a glimpse into a world that was new to me, and while I was still too young to love her in the way I do now, I yet loved her for the wealth, the beauty, the elegant splendour of life which she represented.

And so little by little I became attached to her by the two dominant passions of man's heart—ambition and love. I looked to her as to the supreme goal of my existence—she was to be the dazzling reward to which I should one day attain. It was owing to her influence that I first made the tremendous efforts which were required to raise myself, but soon I continued them for love of her.

Confess that I must indeed have loved her to have sacrificed so many things for her sake! Affections which can never be replaced, friendships, my Vendée that I see ever as a picture before my eyes, and peace—the peace that without doubt would

have been mine if I had remained among my own people—upright, unambitious men and women, who have no desire beyond a rainy spring and a stormless summer.

June 20th.

Monsieur Laubriet and his family are no longer here, as perhaps you know; they will stay on at Landehue until November.

And here, in this great Paris, I remain alone, without relations, without friends—for Loutrel, although we still live under the same roof is not now to be counted among the latter—and recall all the memories of the bitter winter and of the kindlier spring, which have just gone by. I see more clearly the obstacles, the social disparity which separates me from the Laubriet family; I know myself, and I know them better now. I was conscious, no doubt, even from the time I was a child, that there was this distance between us. But what then? I imagined, boy as I then was, that when I had once taken my bachelor's degree I should have half-way covered it, and that it was quite enough to know a little Latin to become one of their set. Since that time I have learnt to understand that I am hardly nearer to them than I was before, and that there is still a long, very long, almost interminable distance between us. Two things have helped me to take the measure of it. First, the smile in your eyes when I said to you: "Mademoiselle Madeleine is rich; her mother belongs to the nobility; her father has a country house in Vendée." But a deeper and

even keener sense of the truth than that impressed on me by your kindly scepticism came to me when I saw them.

It was in February, the 16th day of the month, when I first met Monsieur Laubriet. The next day, according to his invitation, I rang at the door of their house in the Rue La Boëtie. "Come to-morrow morning" had been his words to me, "you are sure to find me in." I went therefore in the morning, at the hour which most society men consecrate to business and correspondence. All the old shyness and fear of my youth came over me again. How poorly I was dressed! My overcoat had been frozen to my back or wet through so many times! The haughty demeanour of the servants made me feel ashamed. The footman hesitated to show me upstairs. "Just fancy, this young Noellet! Think of putting oneself out for such a nobody! It is very kind of Monsieur to see him!" And I have asked myself since why he did invite me. I think it was partly out of natural kindness of heart, partly for my parents' sake, and partly from some little feeling of the claim made upon him by his position. It would never have done for a landed proprietor like himself to let a child from his own parish, born within the radius of his own grounds, and, moreover, a godson, live or die in Paris without troubling himself to look after him at all. His honour as a lord of the manor required that he should take me in hand. I made part of his social duties.

I cannot deny that he fulfilled them with affability. I found him in his study, seated at his

desk in his working coat, surrounded by heavy hangings and works of art that allowed no entrance to the outside noise and glare, and he gave me the most cordial greeting. I interrupted him in his work, but he was careful not to allow this to appear. He was simple and friendly in his manner toward me, scarcely betraying the effort he made to talk of things which might interest a man as young, and as unfavourably placed, and as much a stranger as I was to all his occupations and his daily habit of thought. Once or twice, in veiled terms, he even delicately offered the pecuniary assistance of which I stood so greatly in need, but which I, nevertheless, refused. He tried to encourage me, advised what he thought would help me in the future, what post to try for, with the best desire in the world to help me, but with a total ignorance of that terrible struggle for existence in which I had already lost much of my courage. He invited me to come and see him again.

But how could he prevent me looking and feeling awkward? I was terribly ill at ease with him, and in spite of all things he was somewhat so with me also. There was that shadow of embarrassment between us of which two people of different stations become painfully conscious when they have exhausted the commonplaces of conversation. No refinement of breeding can entirely hide it.

You cannot imagine the state of torment I was in, caused by these first interviews, by this repetition of the same questions, which I knew stood

between me and intimacy. More than once I told myself not to go there again. And still I went, urged by the persistent spirit of my race, and having in the interval repaired the unseen rents of my soul, whence my dream escaped.

Then I became a journalist.

Immediately a change took place in our relations. I became rather more self-assured; I had a coat, a certain amount of news, the title of journalist, which, although somewhat vague, was nevertheless a passport for me. I was now presentable. The drawing-room door was set half-open for me. Up to that time my visits to Monsieur Laubriet had always taken place in the morning; now, with other friends of the family, I was invited to spend the evening. Once more I saw Madame Laubriet, Mademoiselle Madeleine, Marthe, and, thanks maybe to the latter, who continued to be obliging and attentive in her treatment of me, I received two more invitations to the Rue La Boëtie during the month of April, the last of their sojourn in Paris.

There I was able to study the Laubriet family amid their fine surroundings, and in their true light. Ah, my friend, how right you were to smile, as I learnt to know too well after this further advance. I found Monsieur Laubriet as kind as ever in his reception of me, and with the same lordliness of manner which is so embarrassing to a poor young man like myself. He was pleased to speak of me to his friends as his godson, and this title alone was sufficient to make them draw mute comparisons which sent the colour into my

face. On one of these three evenings, so deeply noted in my memory, he drew my arm through his and led me into the smoking-room.

"Well, Pierre," he said, "and what news at the *Don Juan?*"

But it needed nothing more than the inimitable way in which he lighted his cigarette to dispel any illusion on my part of equality between us, even if such an idea had entered my head.

Madame Laubriet is, in the same way, not exactly haughty. She represents to perfection the old landed aristocracy of our part of the world. She remains a Vendéean here in the middle of Paris, belongs to the parish of Fief-Sauvin before that of Saint-Phillippe-du-Roule, and is marvellously well up in the history of the local wars in which her relations took part. She still considers the peasants as attached in some kind of honourable serfdom to the land. To break away from it would be to sink. She will never be capable of understanding what I have done. A journalist, though gifted with all the intellect and talent imaginable, is to her like a musician, somebody who plays something for money. The natural bent of her mind is toward the country; it is palpable that when looking upon me she sees La Genivière, and she receives me with the dignified smile of which my remembrance dates back to the days of my childhood.

And, you will ask, what of Madeleine?

My hermit friend, you who have never seen her, and probably, hidden away as you are in your woods at Fontainebleau, will not see her for a long

time, picture to yourself a tall young girl, with golden-brown hair, with a slender neck supporting a head that has a certain haughtiness of pose about it. The features are marked, and just a little too large, as with all the Ponthual family. The eyes, which are gray, have an habitual expression of a kind of absent-minded indifference, but if anything pleases her, or any one makes an original remark, or some one she likes or is bored by comes in and rouses Mademoiselle Laubriet from her demi-slumber, then they become animated and turn a dark green, their glance at times imperious, at times soft and smiling. Her eyes impart a superb look to her of intellectual beauty and animation. She knows it, and amuses herself with the effect produced by these abrupt changes of expression on those who contemplate her for the first time. I have never known her respond to an insipidity, but I have seen her smile at a bold or clever hit. If a clever man enters the room, you may be sure that five minutes later she will be talking or listening to him. Intellect exercises a sort of fascination over her. It is by that means alone that I can approach her. I shall work, I shall achieve, I shall surround her with my growing reputation. When she hears of my successful articles, or of a volume of verse, in which, although her name will not occur, she will be celebrated throughout; when I shall have made myself a position among men of letters; then perhaps she will say to herself: "It is for my sake, for me"; then perhaps, estimating the magnitude of the effort, she will feel touched by it.

She is proud with others, but simple and natural with me. She has not changed at all. I find her the same as in the days when I, running out of La Genivière, would meet her coming from Landehue with her nurse, and she would say to me: "Pierre, have you found something for me to play with to-day?" and then following me to the side of the ditch, while I pushed aside the brambles, scratching my hands and face with the thorns, she, as fair-haired then as a little fairy, would lean her head over, safe from injury, to look at three blue eggs inside a nest.

When will she be less natural with me? When shall I no longer be for her only Pierre Noellet of La Genivière?

Of La Genivière! How difficult it will be to forget that!

Hear me further. When Monsieur Laubriet presented me to one of his friends—I except artists, who, even if they boast of one themselves, think little of people's origins—I could declare that I read in their eyes at the first moment a lively desire to become acquainted with me; the hand would be cordially held out, and the whole manner friendly. "Monsieur Pierre Noellet!" It really seemed that I was missing among the list of his connections. If Monsieur Laubriet added, "On the staff of the *Don Juan*," a shade of difference in the expression was visible, but disappeared again; but if he had the misfortune to proceed with "from Fief-Sauvin," "Ah, I see!" replied the other, and a slight curl at the corner of the lips told me that sentence had been passed upon me.

June 25th.

I went to the Salon yesterday; I was tired, and sat down on one of the couches. Lifting my eyes, I discovered high up in one corner of the room a little picture, so lost to view near the ceiling, and so modest in its dimensions, that only one out of a thousand had probably noticed it. What was the subject, you ask? A woman, half-draped in floating garments, looking at herself in a pool of water. There was no great imagination displayed, but the landscape, the sky, were exquisitely fresh, with the leaves blowing in the wind, the water asleep and smiling like an infant; it was the work of quite a young artist. And I felt a pity for the one who had painted it; some unknown man, poor, no doubt, lost and thrust aside among the crowd of upstarts and protégés. He had worked at it a long time, had put all his heart, his dreams, and a great hope, into his picture; and they had hung it up there, three yards above the floor, where none had seen it. He had been so pleased at having it accepted! In a few days' time he will come and take down his picture, which has obtained neither purchaser or medal. His studio will seem sad to him, and life a burden.

But of what does he complain? Has he not figured in the same Salon with the most renowned and the most successful?

July 2d.

Arsène Loutrel has left me and taken rooms in the Latin Quarter, under pretence of being nearer the school, which is a mere joke on his part. A

cool separation prevented an open rupture. The relations between us had become strained since he insisted on the immediate repayment of the money he had lent. His father may feel happy, for the lessons he inculcated into his son at a tender age were understood, and have been remembered. Two and two made five; I paid a heavy interest to a college friend, and we exchanged quittances when we shook hands for the last time.

I am keeping on the rooms of our fourth floor for myself. They remind me of my first months, yours especially, and moreover I am not rich, although I have on my cards "On the *Don Juan*"; and then the place pleases me. From Loutrel's room, which is now mine, over the plane-trees along the Quai, I can see the Seine, the Pont Neuf, and its small green island, the sluice, and all the old Paris of the city, which you and I used to look at together, and which you explained to me during that hardworking and unhappy winter, which yet had its brighter hours.

I work there all the morning; I read, I write articles which will be refused by Léonce Gay or by Thiénard, the two principal editors of the *Don Juan*. I know beforehand that they will not be accepted; but I grow obstinate, and continue to write. I have in me the perseverance of the farmer, who will go on putting seeds into the same furrow until the blade begins to sprout or the season is too advanced. I try my hand in all sorts of ways, trying to vary both subjects and style. At one o'clock I make my way toward the Rue

Caumartin. I go upstairs to the editor's office, and find none but the porter, who says to me: "Here is Monsieur Noellet, coming to prepare his 'Review of the Press.'" Mon Dieu, yes; fifty papers are awaiting me, folded, and piled in rectangular pyramids. But first of all I half-open the door of Léonce Gay's office, and slip one of my articles under the rock-crystal statuette of a woman, which serves him as paper-weight; I do the same in Thiénard's room, putting my second article under his bronze dog.

Then to work—Paris, the provinces. I have to read every word—and it is no light task—to rip up the papers with a pair of scissors, classify the cuttings, political comments on one side, events of various kinds on the other; after that to fasten together the first lines of passages that may on necessity be transposed: "The *Justice* is severe on the speech made by the President of the Council"; "The *Intransigeant* is merciless"; "Is not the *Figaro* in the right when it says"; "Let us now see what the *Abeille Savoisienne* says." By the help of two wafers and a slip of paper the little black and white squares arrange themselves in line, like so many dominoes. I little thought in the old days that it was in this way one made one's début in the world of letters. After dinner I return for the evening papers. Toward eight o'clock the offices begin to show signs of life. From the farther end of the general office—where I am still alone—I can see the contributors coming in one by one, smoking the ends of their cigars, and with their copy in their pockets. Where have they written

their little column, divided by its three asterisks into its tripping paragraphs? Was it at home, at the café, or at the theatre? The *Don Juan* gets written out at random. During the daytime, only I and the porter are to be seen on the premises. From eight o'clock till midnight there is Thiénard, the man journal, who fills up all the blanks, cuts into the remainder, gives the *Don Juan* its own particular configuration, revises the proofs, does the work of four, and gambles on the Stock Exchange. All the others go and come. "Good-evening, Thiénard. I have brought my news-column—my echoes—my society notes—my theatrical notices"; "Good-evening, Thiénard. Have you room for a puff in the second page?"; "I say, Thiénard, do you know about that affair of little X.? It beats everything! Just you fancy"—and the door closes upon them. This last set of people are not on the regular staff. They are news-mongers, who go on to the boulevards as soon as it is dark, pleased to be allowed admittance to a newspaper so well spoken of by the public and easy of access, every whisper of the green-room being exaggerated by them so as to make themselves of importance, and who, in exchange, obtain information about the races or the source of a telegram lying about on the tables. It is a continual passing to and fro. The proofs arrive from the printers; the telephone rings incessantly; Léonce Gay, the reverse altogether of Thiénard, who never stirs from his office, runs from one to the other. He is all in all to everybody. He has the air of an officer, like Thiénard, but nothing

of the latter's heavy cavalry style, dark and austere, groaning over his work like a grumbling wood-cutter; he is the pretty lieutenant, fair, pink-coloured, laughing, a good fellow and a bad lot, who can talk well, and say witty things, who writes as he talks, and is never put out of countenance, never taken by surprise, and apparently never in a hurry.

I sit alone at the end of the green table, under my shade, in the midst of this turmoil of men and things, hidden behind my evening papers, which I unfold, one by one, as I did the morning ones. The whirlwind rushes past me, but does not disturb me. Who would trouble to bother himself about a common labourer, at two hundred francs a month, busy earning his livelihood with a pair of scissors?

On certain days I see many men, well known in the world of politics and letters, with whom all the others are acquainted. I ask their names. They might be of service to me, but if I am still ambitious as ever my self-confidence has abated and I do not dare accost them. No one thinks of offering to introduce a beginner like myself to them.

And so I remain stationary behind my screen of papers.

By the time I have stuck my last wafer it is still pretty early. I rise, and, before leaving the building, I manage to get hold of Léonce Gay.

"Have you read my article?"

"Of course I have."

"Well?"

"Not Parisian enough."

I knock at Thiénard's door; he is talking to three other persons, and reading the proofs of the first page, just wet from the printers, and falling limply over his hand like a handkerchief.

"What do you want?"

"The article that I——"

"I will look at it to-morrow; no room for anything more to-day."

To-morrow! I do not know when that will be. And so I go out and let myself be borne along by the crowd—lonely, lost, despairing, struggling to recover myself, to clutch at some vague hope of my own amid this multitude, with its cupidities, its lurking passions, its hidden aims, that throngs and elbows me.

You, my forest-ranger at peace, free of heart and resting from life's labour—you who open your window in the evening to let in the woodland breeze—you will understand what I am going to say. When as a lad, living in the Mauges, my hard day's work being over, I stood up and put on my jacket to return home, where supper was awaiting me, what deep full draughts of air I used to inhale! How they seemed to rejoice my very heart. I do not regret the land. It is home for which I long!

September 25th.

How curiously these prolonged meditations affect one's mind! Now when I examine my past life it seems new to me. All kinds of minor events of which I hardly took any notice at the time, or words harboured in the peaceful memory of a

child, assume a meaning now which hitherto was wanting to them; and my early youth itself, that period of perfect purity and innocence, before La Genivière knew of an ungrateful child, seems full, in looking back, of the ideas and dreams which disturb the man of twenty.

Formerly, at this season of the year, they began their hunting, and we our ploughing. Ah, my dear old master, you can never know the strange feeling that would take possession of me, the young peasant, as I saw her riding along beside her father on her gray pony. It was not love; it was pride—pride at belonging to the same parish, to her neighbourhood, to those whom she knew and recognized. For she never failed in her greeting, and would nod her pretty head to us and our oxen over the hedge. My father would lift his hat, and take no further notice of them. But I used to look after the cavalcade as it trotted along to the meet in the soft pale dawn. And often my father would have to call out to me: "See, boy, Nobiais is going aside; look after him." On those days I generally felt no inclination to sing, but I thought about college.

October 13*th*.

The days fly by. Madeleine will soon be back. I ought to be happy, but I am not.

I dread seeing her again. It is now nearly six months since she left Paris, and she has since been at Landehue, or travelling. I have had no news of her all that time. Six months! What unforeseen events may not have happened in that in-

terval! How many things unknown to me have helped to separate us—all that she has seen, thought, and heard! The compassionate, and, even then, hesitating kindness of the family by which I profited, will it not have grown cold, have evaporated? In the country from which I am a deserter, there are not wanting those who are ready to give me a bad character. Nearly all my old friends have separated themselves from me, and there is not one of them, you may be sure, who would have been kind enough to enhance her good opinion of me. Even my very parents speak ill of me.

In Paris, the surroundings in which she sees me help to blind her to my real position; here I am the journalist, the writer, the man who may some day make a name. But down there, my vacant place beside the home hearth would recall the peasant to her. The roads, the fields, the shady masses of the oak trees, the blue distance she looks out upon from her window, all have voices for her; she has seen me with a goad in my hand and a book under my arm, bringing home the beasts. Will they not remind her of it? I dread the treachery of everything she looks upon down there, for although I experience an infinite pleasure in recalling Madeleine as a child, I would that my childhood were unknown to her, or that she could forget it.

November 10*th.*

Having finished at the office earlier than usual this afternoon, I went to the Bois. I was walking

along one of the paths enjoying the beauty of the day, and soothed by the incessant rumbling of the traffic and by the rattling of the horses' bridle-chains as they shook their heads. Women, just returned to Paris, drove past in open landaus in spite of the cold wind and the yellow leaves. Winter is bringing back the householders. Fur garments overflowed the carriage doors with their armorial bearings. It was the first drive through the Bois, a day of festivity, with a succession of pretty toilettes and smiles, of waving hands and of mute greetings from one carriage to another. The women felt themselves once more Parisians, back again amid the elegant luxury of the great city, and even the Bois itself was in a good humour at having recaptured its company.

Suddenly I saw two tall forms, two toques, each trimmed with a pointed feather. As they passed I recognized Marthe and Madeleine Laubriet. They had not seen me; they had driven past with their high-stepping horses, their two erect figures seated side by side in the landau, both looking as fresh as if just returned from the country, and with their eyes partly lowered as they faced the low rays of the sun slanting through the trees. Unknown to themselves they carried my thoughts along with them, for I followed them with my eyes until they turned the far corner of the avenue, and then beyond into the dream in which vision prolongs itself.

On my return to my rooms I scribbled an article, under the heading, "A First Afternoon in the Bois." My pen seemed to write of itself. I wrote

with my happiness, and with that spark of emotion of which something always remains behind, like a faded flower between the leaves of a book.

Léonce Gay read thirty lines of it:

"You've hit it this time."

"Will it be put in?"

"To-morrow morning."

November 11*th.*

Early next morning I received a telegram-card from Thiénard: "Philips is ill. Take his place at the Senate House. I will see to the review." So I started for the Luxembourg, where I was to act as reporter instead of Philips. You know the upstairs gallery, dear master, where the senatorial *clientèle* waits under the usher's eye—friends, petitioners, constituents, all wanting orders of admittance for the sitting. I was there talking with a colleague of the Press, when, guess whom I came across?

Monsieur Laubriet. He was with a Senator, and he let go his arm and came up to me.

"My dear friend," he said, "I want to speak to you. Wait one moment, and I shall be at liberty."

And I had in truth hardly reached the end of the gallery before he rejoined me. I had often known him exceedingly pleasant, but never quite so amiable as now. He wanted me to do something for him.

"Do you know," he said, "that poor M—— is dead?" M—— was a Councillor-General for the Beaupréau district. "It is a great loss," he added.

"And Landehue?" I asked; "and la Genivière?

It is months since I have spoken to any one from Vendée. Have you been back in Paris any length of time? Has anything fresh taken place at home? How is——?"

But he paid no attention to what I was saying and, preoccupied with thoughts of a very different character to mine, he went on:

"Yes, believe me, no one regrets his death more than I do. But the earth belongs to the living, is it not so?"

"Most assuredly."

"That is just what my excellent friend Z——, the Member for the Loire-Inférieure, has just been reminding me. And he has actually been insisting that I ought to come forward as a candidate to replace poor M——; I am the only possible person for the post after Z—— himself, and he is so very persistent. What do you think about it?"

Surprised that an insignificant person like myself should be consulted, as well as surprised to see that Monsieur Laubriet had an ambition of which I should never have suspected him, I, of course, answered that I thought it an excellent idea.

He was pleased with my reply.

"Well, then," he said, "we must get the start. Other candidates might come forward. I shall count upon you. A word or two in the *Don Juan* will pave the way. Just a light, clever, suggestive little notice, with a moderate amount of puff in it, conciliatory, but avoiding all downright promises. And who can do this better than you, with your talent, etc. But remember, above all, not to let

it appear that I have anything to do with it; it must come entirely from you. Will you undertake this?"

You may guess, my dear master, that I readily promised my help in the matter.

It was not, however, without some trepidation as to what might be the result of this request I was going to make. The *Don Juan* does not trouble itself much about local affairs, and I do not stand in any high credit with it. I could not contemplate going and knocking at Monsieur Thiénard's door and saying: "The Councillor-General of Beaupréau is dead. The post is vacant, etc." But my article of the morning saved the situation. Léonce Gay had appeared to be well-disposed toward me, and as he puts a little about everything in his *Echoes*, I went to find him. At first he refused. But when he saw that I persisted:

"I say, Noellet," he said, "are you really so anxious about it?"

"More than I can tell you."

"On his behalf or your own?"

"On my own."

"A love affair?"

"Possibly."

He gave a queer little smile.

"You are growing quite a Parisian, Noellet; I congratulate you. But understand, fifteen lines, not a word more."

So to-morrow Monsieur Laubriet will have the pleasure of reading the following paragraph in the *Don Juan:* "A few days ago we announced the death of Monsieur M—— at his country house at

——. The electors of Beaupréau are already, it seems, beginning to look out for a successor to this honourable gentleman, who had been their Councillor-General for thirty years. We do not, as a rule, interfere with these local elections. But in the present case one man appears so exactly fitted for the post that we do not hesitate to name him—Monsieur Hubert Laubriet, the noted sportsman, well known among the artistic circles of Paris, member of the Agricultural Society of France, and one of the largest landowners of the province. A cultivated, rich, and liberal-minded gentleman, he would be the very man required. It only remains to be seen whether his modesty can be overcome, and if he can be persuaded to enter the arena of politics. Madame Laubriet, *née* De Ponthual, is adored throughout the province."

November 12*th*.

I reached the office at three o'clock; I was sent for to the parlour. There I found Monsieur Laubriet, who rushed forward delightedly, and seized both my hands.

"It was exactly what was wanted," he exclaimed. "The notice was capitally written. Nothing omitted. The few words about Madame Laubriet were quite appropriate. She was very gratified by them. You will find this out for yourself if you will come and dine with us this evening at seven o'clock—just ourselves."

As seven o'clock struck I rang at the door in the Rue La Boëtie. My reception by Madame Laubriet was more genuinely cordial than it had

been before the long vacation. Her proud bearing she will always retain, and it suits her, but it was moderated for me by a smile and a gracious word.

"The paragraph is by the hand of a Vendéean, who does not forget his country, and by a writer who will some day make a name."

To which Mademoiselle Madeleine added:

"And who is already spoken of."

"Oh, Mademoiselle!"

She looked at her sister as she spoke with that air, which belongs to her class, of only giving a third part of her thoughts to what she was saying, and that has so often baffled me and made me ill at ease.

"My father, who understands about such matters, has often said so to us, Pierre. And even we, Marthe and I, who are no judges, were very much amused this morning with your 'A First Afternoon in the Bois.'"

"Have you read it, then, Mademoiselle?"

"Why, yes, Pierre, and it is not at all bad, only there were one or two details that might have been left out. For instance, you mention, as if it was a novelty this season——"

"Why do you tell him that, Madeleine?" interrupted Mademoiselle Marthe. "How could Pierre know——"

"Oh, please tell me, Mademoiselle," I replied, already feeling unhappy and frightened, "you will really be doing me a service."

"Oh, well, it's only a trifle. You describe two otter-skin toques, trimmed with 'a pointed feather,' which we had no difficulty in recognizing.

It was charming on your part—impossible to be kinder. But, my dear Pierre, you speak of two horrors of last winter, which you would have done better not to mention."

I had turned as red as a poppy, and she, noticing this, immediately added:

"Don't let it worry you. You are not obliged to know what has gone out of fashion. There is nothing to show that it is we whom you describe, and, moreover, the greater number of our friends who, like ourselves, had only arrived in Paris the night before, had not any newer dresses on than ourselves."

Monsieur Laubriet now entered the room. We sat down to table. Mademoiselle Madeleine, anxious to atone for having involuntarily wounded me, forgetful that one ought not to joke with people of my kind who have already met with so many bruises in life, drew me into conversation on various subjects which came more within my scope than the fashions—literature, the theatre, the latest news of Paris. I think I got on well. The superior information which the dweller in Paris possesses over ladies who have been spending six months in the country gave me the lead. There was a basket of late roses on the table, still beautiful, although a little fallen, which they had brought from Vendée, and had perhaps kept to give me pleasure. Their sweet, somewhat faded, scent reached me, and brought at moments a trouble with it, disposed as I was just then to be easily upset in my feelings. As Monsieur Laubriet, or Mademoiselle Marthe, took up the conversation,

my eyes involuntarily wandered to these flowers that had been plucked from stems growing in the homeland; like me, they had been cut and brought here, probably by the same hand, and were now scarcely heeded. Just above them, on the opposite side of the table, rose Mademoiselle Madeleine's haughty face, illuminated by the strong light of the lamp. She was thrilling with high spirits and wit. Not a shade of compassion or of musing thought checked the free flow of her light-hearted gayety. I seemed to see her again as a little child, even then the proud darling of fortune, running about the fields among the buttercups, which we named Alleluias. My thoughts were beginning to wander into other scenes, when a question suddenly put to me by Monsieur Laubriet brought me back to the present. My imagination had bolted, and with difficulty I got it again under control. The conversation was full of these sudden starts.

But not a word of La Genivière. It was too delicate a subject to touch upon. By a refinement of breeding, all the members of this family, who were, for the first time, entertaining me at their own table, taxed their ingenuity to find other things to talk about. I was conscious of the effort and discomfited accordingly.

After dinner Madame Laubriet, having taken her place at the corner of the hearth, made me sit down beside her, and then we naturally fell to speaking of home. Mademoiselle Madeleine was standing near, her face turned away from us for she was busy netting a large hammock, the end of which she had hooked on to the window-fastening.

Monsieur Laubriet and Marthe were at the piano turning over a new score.

"I went twice to see your father and mother," said Madame Laubriet, "and my husband was there oftener. You know, Pierre, we have always held those estimable people in great respect."

"There is the same feeling on their side, Madame."

I did not dare ask after my father at first.

"Is Antoinette well?"

"She is the prettiest girl in the town."

"And Marie?"

"I hear that it will not be long before she is married. She will be a genuine farmer's wife. Your parents set their hopes on her, and I think they are right. They have a future to look forward to now."

"And how are they?"

"Very much aged, especially your father."

"Did you speak to him about me?"

"Of course I did."

"And what did he say?"

Madame Laubriet, who, up to that moment, had kept them discreetly fixed on the Japanese screen she was holding in her hand, now turned toward me her large velvety brown eyes, in which could be seen the reflection of many wise thoughts, as one by one they passed across her mind.

"He has not got over his anger," she said. "And can you be surprised, my dear boy? I can well imagine his feeling. It was impossible for your parents to understand a determination like yours. And especially now that Jacques has gone, there is the farm which must fall more and more into

the hands of servants. I know nothing sadder than this forsaking of the land."

"But, Madame," I answered somewhat hastily, "my sisters will marry, as you yourself have just said, and will carry on the family tradition: for myself I have broken it."

"And you have never regretted it?"

"No, Madame."

"I trust you never may do so. There was such an honourable, wide, beautiful life awaiting you there."

"You think, then, Madame, that it is possible for a man who has studied as I have to go back to the plough?"

She hesitated a moment, turned her eyes back to the screen, and answered indifferently:

"I do not say that, Pierre."

She did not say it, but she thought it. Mademoiselle Madeleine was drawing her wooden needle threaded with its blue string more slowly through her netting, and I knew she was listening to what I was saying. Why, I cannot tell, but a sudden courage seized me.

"No, Madame," I replied in a low, but determined voice, "it is impossible. Each man has his own vocation in the world. My separation from the land is irrevocable. I have an ambition different to that of my parents, and henceforth I shall devote myself to it entirely."

"And what is your ambition?"

"To make a name for myself, Madame. Many a time since I was on this paper I have elbowed men who, like me, were born on a farm, not even in

such a good position as myself—for my father is after all his own master—who are now painters, sculptors, musicians, authors, forming an *élite* society side by side with that of birth and money, at home everywhere, and everywhere well received. I have met several of them in this house, Madame. Well, my ambition is that after having been received here out of pity in virtue of being a child from the Mauges——"

"Oh, Pierre!"

"Suppose out of kindness, Madame, that you were some day to be proud of Pierre Noellet, of Fief-Sauvin? How I should thank you on that day for having received me, and for the encouragement, of more value to me than you can imagine, afforded me by the smallest mark of attention on your part."

I thought I could perceive that Mademoiselle Madeleine was pausing a long time over the knotting of her thread before beginning another mesh. What was in her mind? I could not see her face. All I could detect from the side view of her oval cheek was that she smiled a little.

Madame Laubriet, touched perhaps, but not convinced, smiled feebly.

"Do not think," she said, "that I blame everything concerning your ambition. There is a pride which is anything but displeasing to me. The only thing that is bad about yours is that your parents have suffered so much for it. I should have been glad if I could have brought about a reconciliation. But I see it is too late now to go back."

"Much too late, Madame."

"Well, I know of no other way to allay your father's anger. Do you know of any?"

"Of none, Madame. There are many things besides which keep me away from my father. Twice he has driven me from the house, and you may be sure that I shall not make the first step toward returning."

"Do not say that, Pierre. It is an evil word that I do not like to dwell upon. Time changes many things."

"Not many in Vendée, Madame."

She smiled somewhat sadly. I rose and thanked her. Monsieur Laubriet came up to me in an easy sort of way as if he had heard nothing of our conversation. We went together to the billiard-room and played a few games which he very much wished to lose.

And then I returned home.

November 13th.

This first interview which I had dreaded had therefore turned out well. I had been better received than usual, and there had been an additional shade of interest in their manner toward me. I had been able to tell Madame Laubriet, in her daughter's hearing, what my aim in life was. She had given no sign of surprise or incredulity. My ambition had not appeared to her too laughable. She believed as I did that I should some day make a name. As far as I could see, Mademoiselle Madeleine had also, while listening, thrown up her head with the little haughty gesture she has when anything pleases her. "Your article on

'A First Afternoon in the Bois' was not bad at all," she had said to me. A little want of experience and knowledge of the ways of society were no doubt lacking. I know it myself. But all that will come in time.

I feel my courage revived and doubled this morning.

Do not despair, Pierre Noellet; the wind is blowing your way. You will be a somebody. You will win the victory in spite of all the obstacles that block your path. The lowliness of your birth will now soon be forgotten. Your professional name will be a new name. Then those who have blamed you will applaud. Then you will be able to say to fortune, to beauty: "I am your equal, and my name is talent." Then, perhaps, Madeleine Laubriet will feel that she can love me. You love her too much, Pierre Noellet, for her not to love you some day.

Oh, my dear old friend, what a dream! It is mine more than ever. Do not disturb it: let me dream on.

December 10*th.*

Monsieur Laubriet is chosen Councillor-General, no other candidate having opposed him.

The news was wired to me this afternoon at the office. And this evening, at nine o'clock, I rang at Rue La Böetie. I thought it was only my duty to go and congratulate Monsieur Laubriet. I was pleased to have had my share in his success, and the foolish conceit we have of our own deeds whispered words to me on my way of flattering greeting.

What a wise fortune-teller!

As the door of the drawing-room was opened my eyes fell on the following scene:

The Laubriet family was seated in a half-circle round the fire, with a look of attention on their faces, while in the middle, with his back to the fire, stood a stranger, who looked like an American planter, very tall, with a long black beard reaching half-way down his chest, leaning forward a little toward Mademoiselle Madeleine, who was clapping her hands, as she said, laughing:

"That's nice of you, very nice!"

He drew himself up as I drew near, and looked me over from head to foot. I was feeling displeased at Madeleine Laubriet's familiarity with this unknown man. My face must evidently have betrayed my feelings, for Madame Laubriet began to laugh and said:

"You do not recognize him?"

"No, Madame."

"Look well at him."

"Is it possible, surely——"

Then they all burst out at once—one in answer to my questioning looks, the other in explanatory exclamations about him.

"Yes; it is really he, our dear Jules de Ponthual. Doesn't he look grand?"

"Fourteen months' tour round the world! Landed from India yesterday. Got into Paris this morning, and come round to see us this same evening. Isn't it nice of him? Without giving us any warning, just as he used to do!"

"And what things he has seen!"

My old fellow-collegian had let his beard grow and was very sunburnt; but I ought to have known him; there are not two men in Paris with such shoulders as his. He was probably not more pleased than I was at this meeting, but, nevertheless, he held out his hand.

"If I have covered some ground during my late travels," he said, "you, too, I believe, have not been stationary."

I understood that he had already heard about me.

And then he started off with long stories about his journey round the world, some of them of a cold-blooded ferocity, in which was a mingling of golden skies, of swamps with red flamingoes, of young Egyptian fellaheen holding out their pitchers of water to the thirsty traveller, of alarms, of wild beasts, of hunting-parties: all of which produced their due effect. His relations looked at him with admiration. He, on his side, was delighted with their astonishment. For myself, I hardly listened to him. I was watching Madeleine Laubriet, who never took her eyes off him, and a mad jealousy began gnawing at my heart. She did not lose a word he said, or a single look or action. She was conscious alone of him. With him, this proud young girl had become eager and attentive. She laughed at things that were not funny. She manifested an exaggeration of feeling aroused by Ponthual's tales; on hearing of the least danger he had run she was all astonishment, fear, and emotion. Her whole attitude was a conscious or unconscious flattery addressed to her

cousin. Something of greater power than the world and its conventions, or than breeding, had suddenly transformed her.

I was so wretched that I could not stand the prolongation of the trial.

At the end of half an hour I took my leave, under pretence of having to get through some urgent work.

They all saw me depart without the slightest concern; indeed, they took as little notice of my leaving as if I had been a child among a group of elders listening to the tales of a grandfather, which I was considered too young to appreciate. No one asked me to stay; no one said: "I hope you will come again." Madeleine did not so much as turn her head. Once more in my room, seated in front of my books, which I have not the courage to open, I can see her again with her eyes on Ponthual, and with that clinging look in them which expressed more than the ordinary pleasure at his return.

And why had he made such haste to run and see her? What is happening? I tremble at the thought of making too true a guess. Ponthual has always been an enemy of mine. We hardly ever spoke to one another at college. Whenever I could get hold of the ball and throw it at him, I aimed with a hidden hatred, and tried my best to hurt him. Something whispered me even then that we were to be rivals in after life. And here he comes, throwing himself in the way of my dream, my old and cherished dream!

I hate him.

Alas! And I can see all the advantages he has over me—money, name, education. I am his superior in intellect, and yet this evening I sat as if struck dumb. What an advantage these long travels have been to him! Living in contact as he has with men and things, the insufficiency of his studies has been repaired. He is no longer the same man. I left him heavy, ignorant, rough, and I find him now tall and strong, interesting as everybody is who has been about and seen things, and coldly polite. What a rapid transformation it has been for him, while I have been painfully climbing up the hill of poverty and obscurity!

Madeleine will fall in love with him!

The thought is intolerable to me, but I cannot shake it off. I am certain that she is going to love him. And even if it is not he, she will care for some one else before I have been able to climb to her level. Madeleine Laubriet is twenty years of age; she is rich, she is attractive. She has only to look around her and choose. Why should she stoop to pick me out from among the many who are struggling and suffering?

I shall not have time to realize my dream. Why did I not see this from the first? To-day I see it all so clearly. I looked for fame and it has not come. It can never come. For sixteen months I have been fighting in the crowd that, like myself, all wish to make a name. What have I gained as regards her for whose sake I have undergone the suffering of daily striving? Am I not as far from her as the first day I came? Every step I have

taken in the world has been a humiliation. Here I am nobody. Life to me appears useless, void, and almost guilty. It would require years, years that will not be mine!

My poor illusions, I look for them and find them not. Even in my worst days, during the poverty and misery of my early struggle, they were with me and encouraged me. I heard the beating of their wings around me. I said to them: Leave me; I love you, but I will not follow you; you will return later on, when a little renown will have made me worthy of her: illusions born of her smile, my best-beloved ones, leave me! But I did not say it with much firmness, and one of them generally remained behind to console me.

And where are they now?

The wind is blowing a hurricane this evening. It shakes my doors and windows, hurling itself against them in great gusts. It has flung and broken and scattered itself against every corner of the walls and roofs: now it cries and sobs. So many obstacles bar its passage! How free and proud it was as it passed unchecked over our hills down there! A great river of wind flowing with a regular sound as of waves, monotonous and resistless! And La Genivière, perched high on its rock, was like a little island, around which swept the gigantic stream.

Always the same memories, always the same! My happy childhood—when I broke away from it I received a wound, which continues to gape afresh.

This evening I ask myself with dismay if I have not been mistaken? I cannot now go back and the future lies dark before me. What will become of me?

* * * * *

CHAPTER XXIII.

FORSAKEN, ill spoken of, Mélie Rainette lost none of her pride, but went outside her door as little as possible. She had grown to love her flowers, and spent hours in her garden digging and weeding and watching the flowering of some autumn plants which she had picked up here and there. She was vaguely conscious of some resemblance between herself and these plants blown about by the rough winds and beaten with storms. She mourned sympathetically when they died, thinking of her own fate. A languor came over her. She was not ill, but she no longer felt as strong as she did formerly. Her face had gradually grown thinner with her trouble. Clad in her black mantle, she had now the look of a widow, whose thoughts are dwelling on past happiness, and who as far as possible takes no note of outward things.

Then the winter set in. Everything outside was frozen except the rosemary bush, which was, however, growing less vigorous as the years went by. They were sad days for Mélie Rainette, for added to her loneliness was the increasing distress of her circumstances. Work was bad. All the manufacturers throughout the Mauges were lowering their prices. Orders came in less frequently, and even the most skilled weavers received thread for only three or four days' work a week.

Poverty, loneliness, and sorrow of heart—these were much for a young girl to bear. Nevertheless Mélie Rainette did not complain. First of all, being less busy at her weaving, she gave more time to lesser orders for sewing or embroidery, of which, although fatiguing and badly paid, she was fonder, both for the sake of the work itself and for the good light which it required. Her own room was so white and well furnished! She was happier there than anywhere else. It contained all the wealth of the house: lace on the curtains; a firescreen of moss stuck with artificial flowers; an arm-chair that had belonged to her father; a cupboard, nearly empty inside, but made of prettily veined walnut wood, and so polished with white wax that it was a wonder to look upon; and, hanging well in view on its cushion of red velvet between the two glass candlesticks on the mantel-piece, her mother's wedding wreath, which she had rescued from an old trunk to which it had been consigned.

The time passed more lightly there—at least, it seemed so to Mélie.

A few good people still came to see her now and then.

But she had also undertaken a new duty which was a great pleasure to her. The parish priest of Fief, seeing her so violently abused, had not lost his own respect for Mélie, and to avenge her for the evil reports of which she was a victim, he engaged her as a help to the sacristan, an old woman who was falling into the grave, and could no longer attend to the church and its decorations.

This handling of flowers, ornaments, and altar-

cloths was a real delight to Mélie, not less than the distribution of incense to the choir children and the decoration of the church on the eve of festivals. She enjoyed getting out the banners and garlands, and superintending the carpenter who put them up, retiring a step or two to call out to him, "A little higher. A little lower. Yes, that's it." Then there were the old frames to cover with fresh leaves, and rhododendrons and palms, sent from the Landehue conservatories, to arrange round the altar. Mélie's taste for this kind of occupation, which harmonized so well with her character, had developed under the ill-treatment to which she had been subjected. The quiet of these white-arched spaces calmed and refreshed her. She felt in shelter, far away from and forgotten by the world. A scroll well hung and falling gracefully, an inscription in gold letters on a light foundation of muslin, or even an orris-root scented altar-cloth, as she unfolded its smooth, shining folds fresh from the iron, was sufficient to fill her with the joy of a child, who can find food for enthusiasm in everything, and all whose emotions are winged. The humblest duties had a charm for her. As she washed the tiled floor or polished the buffet in the sacristy, the silence of the place hardly broken by the rattling of the window-glass in its lead framework, a deep and delicious sensation of peace stole over her.

Moreover, her great troubles and regrets had subsided into that tranquillity which belongs to all eternal things. Her soul no longer disturbed by them, she looked back on the events of the past

with that feeling of everything having happened long, long ago, which is natural when there has been a violent break in life. She saw herself again as a child, as a girl, then as a woman, at the time when she herself hardly knew how or when her protective affection for Pierre Noellet had grown into something more—into a love that had remained hidden, that she had never confessed, and that had now died completely out of her heart. And as mothers dress with their own hands the graves of the children they have lost, so Mélie surrounded the remembrance of her buried affection with the faces, the words, the smallest circumstance amid which the cherished dead had been born. Sad sweetness of loved graves, she knew you well!

There were times, however, when her courage failed her—days when she was at her poorest, or when some incident occurred and took her by surprise, suddenly recalling the happiness she had lost and the severed friendships.

It was on a day like this, the 28th December, that she saw the people from two of the farms at Villeneuve driving past early in the direction of La Genivière. She knew that the farmer had summoned a whole armament of friends to help him cut down the gorse on a piece of waste land which he wished to clear. Formerly she would have made one of the party. She thought about it a long time after they had passed out of sight as she sat over her small fire, which she had banked up with ashes to prevent it burning too quickly. They had driven noisily through the town, and had seen nothing of Mélie. Before nightfall they had cleared

the old corner of waste land running down to the Evre, one of the last left in the province, that had hitherto been a perfect forest of broom and gorse, rising higher than a man's head, and clothed each spring in a garment of gold. The tall, prickly stems had fallen beneath the bill-hooks and scythes of men and women. Others had tied them into bundles, their hands bleeding from many pricks and scratches. They went quickly to their work, laughing the while. Soon the earth, red from its covering of dead vegetation, was laid bare, not a blade of grass was to be seen upon it, only the bristling points of stems, still moist and green where they had been cut, but fast drying beneath the wind.

As the sun went down four fires, lit at the four corners, began to send up their columns of smoke, and these, rising into higher spirals and rolling over the adjacent hills, gave notice to the dwellers in the near valley that the dense thicket, where formerly the Chouans had found a hiding-place, and where their grandchildren had sheltered as they guarded the sheep, that the waste land of old times, full of song, of flowers, and of memories, had, like everything else, lived its life.

When the evening meal was over, the young people finished up the day with dancing a gavotte, according to the custom when a master-farmer had summoned a large party to make war on his land. Two and two at first, and then all together, both rooms at La Genivière being given up to them, the youths and maidens jumped—the latter with sedateness, the former with more after-supper

hilarity. The married women, with their distaffs, stood against the walls, looking on as they span. There was no violin or bagpipe on account of the recency of Jacques' death. Two girls, therefore, with clear young voices began to lilt "Ah, ah, ah, ah!" and the dancers found it all-sufficient music for their steps. Marie Noellet was the only one who did not dance. Looking as usual dignified and a little sad, she sat in the corner with a pitcher of drink made of service-berry ready to hand to the tired dancers.

It was past ten o'clock when the elder men and women carried off their young ones, the merry sound of their voices and footsteps ringing through the stillness of the winter night, and heard afar long after they had left the farm.

Louis Fauvêpre remained behind the others.

While Marie and her sister were helping their mother put the chairs and tables in order, he sat, lost in thought on a bench near the window, awaiting the farmer, who had gone part of the way with his departing friends. The high spirits he had been in a few minutes before had disappeared. The military bearing, which the boys of the town tried to imitate, had given place to a curious awkwardness of attitude, and he seemed to be ill at ease under the eyes of the two girls, who were running backward and forward, active, silent, and looking equally disturbed. The same cause of agitation affected them all three in different ways. When Marie crossed the room and came nearer to the bench, Louis Fauvêpre especially was so far moved as not to be able to lift his eyes.

And a proud little smile might have been detected on the grave lips of the girl, like the first small shoot from a seed that is longing to burst into flower.

The farmer came in, shook the rime off his hat, and seeing Louis Fauvêpre, seated himself on the bench at some little distance from the young man. Then he made a sign to the women to leave the room.

The two men were left alone, their figures lighted up by the blaze from the bundle of heather which Marie had lighted. The young man sat silent, not knowing how to begin what he had to say, and it was the farmer who spoke first.

"You look all in a flutter, my boy," he said. "What is it?"

"You know without my telling you, Maître Noellet."

"I may have my suspicions, but I must hear about it all the same," replied the farmer, and with a certain tense look of emotion on his face he lifted his head, and, gazing absently toward the far end of the room, he prepared himself to listen.

"Well, Maître Noellet, this is it: I do not think you have ever heard any one speak ill of me?"

"No, my boy."

"You have always been friendly with my father."

"And with his father before him—an old man whom I greatly respected."

"I am earning my living now, Maître Noellet, and have even a little over."

"That's good, Louis Fauvêpre; I like to hear that."

"I am old enough to think of marrying and setting up a home of my own."

"I have nothing to say against that."

"And it is your daughter, Marie, that I want for my wife."

Julien Noellet let his heavy hand fall on the young man's shoulder, and they looked each other in the face.

"My poor boy," he said, "I have no need of a wheelwright here. I had two sons, as you know; one is dead, the other as good as dead. Since I am now without sons, he who is to be my son-in-law must take their place at the plough, and mine when I am no longer here."

Then, in a lower voice, he added:

"You will find a wife elsewhere, my Louis; there are no lack of marriageable girls in the town."

"But it is your girl I want, Maître Noellet," said Fauvêpre eagerly.

"You cannot have her," replied the farmer.

"Yes, but I mean to have her, even though I leave my father and give up my trade. I have done a little of everything in the course of my life, Maître Noellet—soldier, blacksmith—but I know how to use the goad and handle the plough as well. You know yourself that this summer when work was slack at home I hired myself out to the farmer at Grande-Ecorcière. Don't think I am afraid of the land. Give me Marie. I will come and live here with you. I will stay to take your place at La Genivière when you are gone. Maître Noellet, if you want a son to drive your ploughs, here I am."

He had risen, and stood up tall and bold; his eyes flashed, the knotted muscles of his arm could be seen through his vest as he crossed them over his chest. And the farmer, who had half risen himself, looked fixedly at him for a while, surprised and proud. His blood did not rise so quickly as that of the younger man, but it was stirred. A light came into his eyes, the features relaxed; for a moment he forgot his trouble as he saw that a son had come to him, that before him stood a true peasant, a Vendean who loved the dark earth, a future master for La Genivière, and of the same race as himself and his forebears. He enfolded him in his arms in a strong embrace, and as his gray hairs touched the vigorous head of the young man:

"I am willing, then," he said. "You can come and speak to her next Sunday, Louis Fauvêpre.'

He had spoken the words of betrothal. The soul of his ancestors must have been present as he uttered them. A thrill passed through the whole white house in greeting of the heir. The door closed softly. Was it happiness returning? The flame on the hearth leaped up. On the farther side of the wall there was the rustling of a dress, the sound of a gliding footstep receding in the distance. At the end of the courtyard a dreaming redbreast sent three notes out into the night.

* * * * *

At that same hour Pierre Noellet, who had received a short invitation from Monsieur Laubriet

the day before, was entering the reception-rooms of the latter's house in Rue La Boëtie.

"Come, my dear Pierre, all our friends will be there to-morrow evening; your place is among them."

A large company was assembled, and Pierre, after his salutation to the mistress of the house, had retired to his usual post of vantage near the window.

In spite of the friendly brevity of Monsieur Laubriet's note, he had had a presentiment that a cruel trial awaited him. He had come, nevertheless, with a sort of desperate feeling of bravado—the feeling made up of pride and courage, which makes us face a trouble or a danger which no flight can avoid, and to say to it: "You are looking for me; well, here I am. Hit out straight at me, and let me look you full in the face." He had inherited the fighting blood from his old grandfather. Pierre had so dreaded hearing the news which he had now run to meet that he had not been near Monsieur Laubriet for a fortnight. Very pale in face, wholly indifferent to the young men who passed by him with their opera-hats in their hand, and who looked astonished, and smiled at the poor boy's tragic countenance, he stood and watched Mademoiselle Laubriet. All eyes were turned upon her; she was the centre of attraction, and looking altogether exquisite in a dress of mignonette colour, embroidered with gray and white. Independently of this, her whole bearing and the temporary sovereignty of happiness which crowned her brows were sufficient evidence that the entertainment was in her honour. Her cousin Ponthual

followed her as she passed from group to group, as if to share in the felicitations. He was smiling good-humouredly above his long beard. They were surrounded by bowing black coats, by pretty hands held out by women gloved to the elbow, by a murmur of insipid and conventional words, the tenour of which could be guessed without hearing them, and each one of which was like a dagger in the heart of Pierre Noellet.

He had had time to taste the whole bitterness of these congratulations, when Ponthual, having completed the circuit of the room, caught sight of his old schoolfellow and came up to him. Madeleine had paused to talk with some of her girl friends, who were devouring her with questions and smiles as they examined her dress. Ponthual had nothing left of his insolent and mocking manner. He was all friendliness, and held out his broad hand to Pierre with the hearty cordiality of strong and happy beings whose hearts are free from rancour.

"Well, friend," he said, "you know."

Pierre just touched the tips of Ponthual's fingers and replied:

"No, I have heard nothing."

"Then I will make haste to tell you the news. We are old acquaintances, and I think you will sympathize with me in my happiness: I have been engaged to my cousin Madeleine since the day before yesterday. You are surprised?"

He took the pallor and the wild looks of this poor creature, whose heart he was unconsciously breaking, for astonishment.

"No," said Pierre, "I am not surprised. Is it —quite settled?"

"Everything in the most correct and official manner, of which this gathering is a witness. We shall be married in the middle of March. I shall take Madeleine travelling. We shall go—Ah, there you are. Good evening. We were hoping you would come."

Ponthual had turned away to shake hands with a new arrival.

The torture had lasted long enough. Pierre felt that he should soon lose control over himself. He began to sob. He left the window recess and made his way through the throng to the door. A voice was calling to him. "Make haste; hide your sufferings from this gay crowd. Escape into the heart of the great, indifferent Paris, where sorrows and joys alike are lonely, submerged, unknown, and of which the very dust is familiar with tears. Make haste."

And yet, as he was on the point of leaving the room, a sudden desire seized him to have one last look at Madeleine.

She was only a little way from him, distinguishable among the other girls with whom she was chatting by the incomparable charm which belongs to those who know themselves beloved. Pierre Noellet, as he looked over the heads of the assembled guests, across the dazzling glitter of light, the resplendent hangings and the moving pageant of toilettes, had no difficulty in singling her out.

And her eyes caught sight of him, too. She thought he had only just arrived. She smiled

even more engagingly, and, moved by one of the kindly impulses which were uppermost in her that evening, she made a movement as if to go forward and greet him, to thank him for having come, to show herself to him in her new joy in which everyone was sympathizing.

But it was more than he could bear. The sight of her like that was insupportable, and he turned and fled.

Soon he found himself alone in the fresh night air, walking rapidly along the pavement. And suddenly, in the midst of the anguish that oppressed him, the memory of some words addressed to his ambitious youth returned to him with a bitter sense of irony:

"What a pity some one does not give him a lift!" It was his tutor speaking, and Loutrel, with his squeaky voice, made answer: "You, with such powers as you possess, could aspire to anything."

CHAPTER XXIV

MÈRE NOELLET, when informed that same evening of her daughter's betrothal to Louis Fauvêpre, was supremely happy. The imagination, which was natural to her, immediately carried her beyond the present, and she saw in the event for which she longed an inducement to the farmer to soften the severity of his attitude toward Pierre, and already pictured the good news being sent off to that marvellous country, in which her thoughts were wandering day and night, and a letter arriving in reply. Yes, a letter! That was the height of her ambition, the dream she had so long cherished, not daring to dwell upon it, and which might now be allowed to blossom on account of the little ray of sunshine which was gilding La Genivière.

What could be more natural and reasonable?

How could her daughter be married, and Pierre not informed of it? And as it never rains but it pours, the farmer's wife, who had known the truth of the proverb as regarded her troubles, said to herself: "No doubt it holds good with happiness, too, and that one good thing brings another. To-day it is my daughter's betrothal, and to-morrow it will be a letter from my son."

She did not dare speak openly, however, to her husband. She had known him so violent and angry about Pierre, and his resentment against him,

although somewhat abated by time, still existed. Above all, she was aware, having many a time had proof of it, that he held it a solemn point of honour not to go back on his word. Julien had never been known to belie himself, whether as regarded a matter of business or a trivial promise of which any one else would have made light. And she knew well, poor woman, that a wife's tears or prayers would have no power to remove the sentence passed upon the child. She had tried too often to have any doubt on this point.

Finally, it was Abbé Heurtebise who undertook the task.

"I will approach him on the subject," he said to her; "you leave it to me."

Some days went by, and Mère Noellet could hear of nothing having been said, for the abbé always took his time about everything. He was not one of those who think it does not matter where or when they accost people. Before he entered upon any subject, he liked to feel in a certain frame of mind himself, and to be quite sure that the person he was addressing was in one equally suitable. He had probably come across the farmer several times either in the town or the fields or along the road, but on each occasion either the presence of a third person, or some business on which the farmer was bent, or the state of the weather, or even something more insignificant still, had kept the abbé from giving voice to the words which were all ready to be spoken.

At last one day, as he was coming down through the copse woods from Vigneau, and was about to

cross the river, he saw the white walls of La Genivière in front of him, and Mère Nollett's message flashed across his memory. He closed his breviary, keeping his thumb between the leaves, and began pondering, as he followed the footpath which ran between the bare willow bushes.

The farmer was just at that moment mending the footbridge which crossed the Evre at the bottom of the old piece of waste land. It was simply an oak trunk which had been flung across the water ages back, and which now, split with the sun, and hollowed by the rains, looked like a small boat of bark half full of black mud. So he had turned carpenter for the time, and, astride on the trunk, was nailing on to it a new oak plank. His long legs hung over the gray, sluggish water, which was rippled by the silently expanding eddies.

And he, too, was thinking of Pierre.

He had got about half way through his work when, reaching out his hand to take a tool from his box, he accidently lifted his eyes—from the old habit of looking to see what the weather was like—and caught sight of Abbé Heurtebise descending the copse path toward the river.

It was inconvenient to the farmer to have to get off the trunk and make room for him to pass. He did not, however, let this be seen, but first replacing his tools one by one in his box, he worked himself back by degrees, still astride the bridge, and helped himself with his two hands till he reached the bank, for he was not sure enough of his old legs to venture to stand upright upon it.

The abbé crossed the bridge, which cracked

under his heavy foot, not being as yet quite securely fastened, and stopped beside the farmer. They were of equal height; but the farmer, although younger by at least ten years, had no longer the soldier-like air, nor the extraordinarily animated and energetic expression of eye of the elder man.

"And so you go riding on the trunks of trees now," said the abbé.

"What would you have me do?" replied Julien. "I have my double weight of sorrow, and that makes me a bit heavy."

"Have you had any news of your son lately?" The abbé put the question abruptly.

The farmer seemed troubled by the question, and looked down at the box he was holding.

"No," he answered, "I have not."

"How long is it since you had a letter?"

The farmer made no reply.

"Has he written to you since May?" the abbé continued.

"No."

"And has any one of your household written to him?"

"No."

"We are now near the end of February, Julien, so it is eight months ago."

"You may be sure that I have counted them myself," said the farmer.

"Yes, I can see you are in trouble about it. But that is not enough, my friend. Your son acted wrongly—very wrongly. You made use of your authority, and you were in the right. But perhaps you went a little too far, Julien?"

"In what way?"

"In forbidding Pierre to write to you. At this moment you are in ignorance as to what may have become of him, body and soul. Are you even sure that he is alive?"

The word struck home. The farmer gave a start, and glanced up quickly at the abbé. A sudden look of anxiety had come into his eyes.

"Alive?" he repeated—"alive?"

"Do not be alarmed, Julien. It was only my way of speaking. If he were dead you would have known it. Did not Monsieur Hubert tell us that he saw him from time to time? No, you may be sure that he is still among the living. But does that cover all that it is your duty to know about your son—your only son? And will you let your daughter be married without sending him word about it?"

The farmer stretched forth his arm toward La Genivière, as if to call it to witness.

"I sometimes failed in my duty to my father in small matters," he said. "I never knew him take the first step toward reconciliation."

Pierre, eighty miles away, in the Laubriets' drawing-room, and Julien, on the bank of the Evre, had met in spirit in their similar reply to the same interrogation.

Abbé Heurtebise looked around him at what had been the old waste land, now broken up by a first ploughing, but still cleaving together in great clods of earth, whence protruded the broken, twisted, and already lifeless roots of furze and broom. A shade of sadness passed across his face.

"The past," he said; "where is it now, my poor Julien? I am concerned in it as well as you, and yet I say to you, 'You must not let things go on as they are between yourself and your son; it does no good either to you or him.'"

He did not press the matter further, for he knew his man and his country too well to imagine that he could carry the formidable fortress of Vendéean resentment in a single assault.

He nodded quickly to Noellet, and went on up the hill toward Villeneuve along the edge of the ploughed field, where clung bits of the heath that had been cleared away.

The peasant turned round, and got astride the bridge again to recommence his work. But the echoes no longer rang to the regular strokes of his hammer, for after each nail had been knocked in there was a pause; Julien Noellet was thinking over what the abbé had just said to him. Now and then an impatient movement of his legs, expressive, no doubt, of some sudden mental exclamation, sent the frightened fishes to the bottom of the Evre, that still ran its cold, slow course under the fine scum of foam.

CHAPTER XXV.

He was thoughtful and anxious, but he had not yet made up his mind. The resolutions of country people take as long to grow and ripen as their harvests. Julien held long talks with himself; he went over the past as he worked in the fields, his trouble at one moment inclining him to say yes, and his self-love at another to say no. Some weeks went by in this unhappy and conflicting state of mind. It might perhaps have gone on longer still if life itself had not suddenly put the question to him afresh, and in a way which allowed of no hesitation as to its answer.

The time fixed for Marie's wedding was now drawing near. It happened on one of the last Sundays, after evensong, that she was waiting, as had been her habit since her betrothal, for Louis Fauvêpre to come and have a talk with her.

Joy and sorrow, those who are dying, and those who are going to be married, the same old walls look on at all that passes. In the middle of the room at La Genivière the farmer was seated on a bench in front of the table, resting himself, his feet still white from the dust of the road. He had just come in from the town. His wife was folding up her cap on the bed, which, alas, still stood empty. Marie was standing up and listening. She heard a firm step crossing the courtyard, and

a little quiver passed over her which seemed to transfigure her face. She looked delightfully pretty in her pleasure and shyness, and when he entered in his fine clothes, proud and confident of her love, she went up to him and put her head on his shoulder, half smiling, half serious, with a look in the direction of the old people as she let him embrace her. Julien made his future son-in-law sit down opposite to him.

His sad stern face always relaxed a little when he saw Louis Fauvêpre, whom love had won for the land. A bright ray of hope warmed his heart. He rejoiced in the thought of a near future when the farm-lands, better worked by the younger hands, would bring the masters in money and when he himself would be relieved of the heavier tasks, and have less worry and fatigue. For, although not an old man, he felt worn out. He had reached the period of life when ambition no longer makes for more distant stages, but returns to the hearth as to the final halting-place. Had not the women seen him for the first time sowing convolvulus and other small seeds under the vine-trellis, taking a fancy to cover the front of the house with flowers?

When the young man, therefore, had taken his seat on the farther side of the table, Julien Noellet called out in a cheerful voice:

"Go and fetch a bottle of muscadet, Marie; we will drink to your coming marriage."

And then he added to Louis Fauvêpre:

"The weather is heavy to-day; we shall have a storm, I think, before nightfall."

"Perhaps so," said the young man; "it will be good for the vetches, which are perishing for want of rain."

"You are right, Louis Fauvêpre; a little wet will do them good, and the wheat too."

"You've got some fine wheat, Maître Noellet; you will see, in return for taking me on at La Genivière, you will have your barns full."

"It will be always so now, my friend; you have brought me back my luck."

Marie now placed a bottle and two glasses on the table. As she looked through the open door toward the stables, Fauvêpre asked what she saw out there.

"Two magpies chattering," she answered. "We shall have company."

She was simple-minded, this tall, good-looking girl; she repeated what she had always heard, and what she half believed: "When two magpies chatter, it is a sign that company is coming."

"Pooh!" said Fauvêpre, "who should be coming?"

"No one," put in Julien. "Formerly, as soon as evensong was over on Sunday, we had a succession of farmers' wives and their children, or of farmers who had business with me; but when a house is in mourning, you see, the people keep away. The magpies are mistaken."

He had hardly finished speaking when the postman appeared, who came in, his stick under his arm, and shaking the dust off his shoes.

"You saw the glasses on the table then?" said the farmer.

"No; I have a letter for you."

The eyes of all present turned to Julien, who rose, seized with a great alarm.

"Where does it come from?" he asked, with an effort.

The postman felt in his leathern bag, and answered:

"From Fontainebleau."

"I do not know that name," said Julien; "is it far from Paris?"

"About as far as from here to Nantes," replied the postman.

And he handed the letter to the farmer.

The latter took it with a trembling hand, and studied the writing upon it for a minute or two.

"No," he said slowly, "it is not from him."

And see how contradictory human nature is; he had refused to receive letters from his son, and yet now, when he saw that this one was not from him, his eyes filled with tears.

"Take it and read it for me, Louis Fauvêpre; my sight is too dim to-day."

The postman went off, and the young man, opening the letter, read aloud as follows:

"FONTAINEBLEAU,
"*April* 16*th*, 188—

"MONSIEUR NOELLET,

"I am writing to you, moved to do so by the sincere friendship which I have felt for your son since I first met him in Paris, Quai du Louvre.

"Pierre is no longer the man he was. Life, which seemed to smile upon him, has suddenly

been clouded. Since the cruel disappointment of December 28, he has lost all his strength and energy. He is doing nothing; he is ill; he has, I hear, forfeited his position on the *Don Juan*. Trouble, illness, absinthe, which is so fatal, would soon bring him into the most deplorable condition if some friend did not warn you of the danger. I have taken this task upon myself. It is for you now to see what can be done. Do your duty; I consider that I have done mine.

"Your obedient servant,

"CHABERSOT."

For some time there was a dead silence after Louis Fauvêpre had finished reading. The letter was somewhat of a mystery to the people of La Genivière, owing to the less familiar language of the old humanist, and to their ignorance concerning events to which he referred.

It was the mother who first broke silence.

"Pierre is ill like the other one!" she cried, bursting into tears. "You see, he has not even the strength to write!"

"Why should you think that?" said the farmer. "I forbade him to write, and that is a sufficient reason, I think!"

"Poor child!" she continued, "and that letter is nothing to you? You do not realize that he is unhappy, that he is——"

"He is punished," said Noellet. "I knew he would be, but in what way is not explained."

He spoke quietly, and his look and the sound of his voice showed that the old anger had given way.

But Mère Noellet was too agitated herself to notice this.

Seeing Marie also in tears, the farmer told the women to go.

"You will not mend anything with your crying. I must talk over this with Louis Fauvêpre."

They went into the next room, and when the men were alone: "What happened on December 28?" asked the farmer.

"It was the day you consented to my marriage with Marie."

"Yes, I remember, after the clearing up of the waste. But it is not that to which the letter refers. What does it say?"

"The cruel disappointment."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Indeed I do not."

"He is ill and in trouble; there is no doubt about that," said the father.

"He has taken to drink," added Fauvêpre; "he is intoxicating himself with absinthe—and that's bad."

"Really?"

"I have known men in the regiment who died from drinking it."

"Who died from it!" repeated the farmer.

He hid his face in his hands, meditating on this grave and unexpected news. But he felt unable to think of anything; he only had confused visions of his son and a feeling of some overwhelming trouble of heart. At last he took hold of Louis Fauvêpre's hand.

"I cannot think what to do," he said. "Give

me your advice, my dear boy; tell me how to act."

"Do you want me to give you my frank opinion?"

"Yes; tell it me."

"Go and bring your son home."

"What are you thinking of, Fauvêpre? Go to him, to a boy who has lied to me!"

"I know it."

"Who was the cause of his brother's death, who has brought me nothing but poverty and shame since he was a man——"

"Maître Noellet," said the young man in a tone of decision, "all that is now past and over. Pierre is ill, and you should have no other thought about him now but that he is your child, and that he needs you."

"If he is ill, there are doctors over there to look after him, and if when he is well again he wishes to return, he is old enough to find the road that he took when he went away."

"He will not return along it alone, Maître Noellet, after your having driven him away."

"Besides, he has not sent for me."

"The letter does that for him. Go and bring him home, Maître Noellet."

"And after that?"

"After that, it will be time to think what else to do. I do not know what will happen then, but you will have done your duty."

"And then I have never travelled so far in my life," said Noellet, feeling staggered.

"Very well, then you can begin now," replied

the young man. "It is never too late to do that. If you want a companion, take Antoinette—not Marie, of course."

The farmer sat frowning and thinking, with bent head. Then he drew himself up, held his glass up to the level of his eye, and said:

"You have spoken like a man! Let us drink to your marriage, Louis Fauvêpre, for we have not done so yet."

They drank, put their glasses down on the table, and sat on in silence, and the women, hearing that their voices had ceased, came back into the room and tried to read in the men's faces to what decision they had come.

Then, after another minute had passed, the farmer looked at Fauvêpre, saying:

"Yes, my friend, I will go and fetch my son."

Mère Noellet clasped her hands together.

"What did you say?" she cried. "Noellet, do not cheat my hopes. You are going to fetch him?"

Filled with a hardly believable joy, she lent toward them, interrogating first her husband's face, and then that of her future son-in-law, not able to trust her own happiness.

Noellet was paler than usual, but also calmer, and pleased with his own courage.

Louis Fauvêpre looked at Marie, proud of feeling himself loved, consulted, and almost worshipped by the members of his newly-found home.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MÈRE NOELLET began immediately to pack up in preparation for the journey. It was not a heavy task, for the travellers only took with them a small, black-covered basket, fastened with a peg, sufficient to hold a few provisions and a handkerchief, cap, and white collar for Antoinette, who wished to do honour to Paris. But the good woman spent twice the time in looking up these things than was necessary. She forgot first one and then the other, her thoughts, winged with affection, flying to her son, trying to picture the joy, and to fancy what the first words would be, as he stepped over the threshold of La Genivière; for now that he was free to return, she would not even allow herself to think for a moment that he would not come back. To return home, was not that a cure for everything? *Mon Dieu!* how would she be able to bear this great joy, she who had never seen him since he left? And he, what would he say when he saw his father and Antoinette, his favourite sister, as bright with youth as a morning convolvulus, arriving in Paris?

Her dear child! She forgave him so fully for all his sins that she even asked herself if she had ever had any feeling against him except the great regret of not being able any longer to kiss him.

He ungrateful? No one who knew him could

accuse him of that! On the contrary, how grateful he had been for all the compliments showered on him, when he ran home from school with the silver cross which even now was lying in the cupboard so full of mementoes of the past! The illness and the trouble of which the letter spoke, were they not all due to his having been sent away from home? Was it likely he would not suffer when she, now almost an old woman, felt only half alive separated from her Noellet? But now all that was over. Louis Fauvêpre—ah, the worthy man!—had persuaded the father to take this great journey to Paris, and Pierre would now be sure to return.

She perpetually caught herself dreaming like this, and each time began trotting off again and scolding herself for allowing her thoughts to wander so whenever she thought of her Noellet.

The farmer and the girls were already fast asleep before she had finished packing the basket, pinning the handkerchief, and overhauling and brushing the clothes which she spread ready for the travellers on two chairs. Every one, herself included, was up before dawn.

She lit a fire with a fagot of vine-branches, around which there were reiterated farewells, and loving and needless cautions; and then Julien and Antoinette, deeply affected at leaving the farm, were carried off by La Roussette through the frosty morning air.

La Rousette, with her slender legs, was as fast a trotter as ever, and covered the ground like a woodland doe. They reached Chalonnes in good time. The cart was put up at the hotel. The

travellers crossed the bridges over the Loire on foot, got into the express for Paris, and, bumped and shaken, went on without stopping until they reached the station of Saint-Lazare at three o'clock in the afternoon.

Julien Noellet had passed the time in conversation with a sheep-farmer, and Antoinette in looking out of the window at the fields as they flew dizzily past.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"WELL, here you are in Paris, Maître Noellet!" said the sheep-farmer, as he jumped on to the platform. "Go down the Rue d'Amsterdam, the Rue du Havre, cross over the Boulevard Haussman, and you will then have only about a quarter of an hour's walk to the Rue Caumartin, near the large boulevards, and will find yourself opposite the offices of the *Don Juan*."

Whereupon he bid farewell to his fellow-passengers, who were somewhat alarmed at finding themselves all alone so far from home.

Julien and Antoinette, following the directions given them, started on their walk across Paris, going slowly, and much delayed at every crossing by the number of vehicles that streamed past them. They were a curious-looking couple, these two peasants, as they stood on the pavement amid the bustle and glitter of the great city, which was unusually alive, every one taking advantage of a day of sunshine—he with his unsophisticated appearance, his short waistcoat, his long hair, his austere face, walking with the same long strides, and in the same calm, deliberate manner, as if he was following the plough; she, delicate and pretty, with her black dress and lace cap, dazzled and attracted by a thousand things at once. She loitered a little behind her father as they passed in

front of the shops, and would have liked to pause and gaze at the windows—the dresses, the jewellery, the early fruits and vegetables from Algeria and the south piled in baskets, the displays of linen drapery, earthenware, and even of toys—everything tempted her. But her father took her by the arm, saying: "Come, Toinette, it is your brother we are here to see." He could think of nothing but the child for whose sake he had left La Genivière. There was but one attraction for him in Paris—his son. All his thoughts were occupied with wondering in what condition he would find him, what he should say to him, and how he should get him home.

Not having the slightest acquaintance with Paris, and being unaccustomed to look for names of streets on blue plates, they naturally lost their way, and found themselves in the Place de l'Opéra, surrounded by the immense concourse of human beings who flooded the boulevards. They made their way now with some difficulty, jostled against one another, and occasioning a momentary surprise as they threaded the crowd. People turned round for an instant to look at them. Antoinette, full of wonder, opened wide her golden-lashed eyes. Her sixteen years were like a song that appealed to everybody's heart, and many felt theirs grow younger for having only brushed past her in the crowd, and remarked with brightening humour:

"What a pretty girl!" Yes, look at her well, you men and women of the pavement; it is the deep-musing country, the spring, that is passing. When the spring goes by our souls take wing.

Julien Noellet, tired with the noise that seemed deafening after the silence he was accustomed to, stood still at the corner of the boulevard, and said to his daughter:

"Ask some one where the offices of the *Don Juan* are, Antoinette. We shall never get there. The houses here are too many."

"My pretty child," answered the costermonger she had questioned, "you are close by; two steps farther, the second on the right."

A little more searching about, and at last they were in the Rue Caumartin, and had reached the offices of the *Don Juan*.

For the first time the farmer looked round him with some curiosity. To the left was the boulevard he had just left, to the right a continuation of the street he was in, and facing him a large folding door standing open and leading into a vestibule piled with packages of tied-up papers. Overhead, on a level with the first floor, was written in red letters on a transparent background, "The *Don Juan*, literary, social, and financial paper, ten centimes."

The farmer, followed by Antoinette, ascended the dusty staircase, and soon came to the landing, where he saw two doors: *Manager's Office, Editor's Office*. These words conveyed no meaning to him. For a moment he stood still, holding his hand to his heart, which was beating violently; then he opened one of them on chance.

A clerk, heavy with sleep and idleness, his elbows on a blotting-pad, looked up. At sight of the Noellets he smiled patronizingly, as much as

to say: "You must have come a long way not to know that there is nobody at the *Don Juan* before eight o'clock, that at eight o'clock I light up and take my stand at the telephone"; but he merely asked:

"Whom do you wish to see?"

"We wish to see Pierre Noellet," answered the farmer.

"You are lucky; he is the only one of the staff who is here during these hours."

"Then he is here?"

"Yes; but one might as well say that he is not."

"He is ill, is he not?"

"How do you know? Who are you, may I ask?"

"I am his father, Julien Noellet, from Fief-Sauvin."

He spoke with a quiet dignity, which seemed to awaken some ancient feeling of respect in this official.

"I had a good man for my father, who was something like you, Monsieur Noellet," he said. He rose, looked at the farmer a moment, and added: "Since you have come to see your son, I ought perhaps to warn you that he may not recognize you. He has had a great trouble, poor young man! I do not know rightly what it is. It is nearly three months ago now. He has taken to drinking absinthe, and you know that spares nobody. He came here his head all muddled and unable to do his work. Monsieur Thiénard saw the state of things, and some scenes took place. And, well, the day before yesterday——"

"What then?"

"Your son was dismissed. It is a pity—a promising young man. But, then, this cursed absinthe has got hold of him. He no longer knows what he is doing, and for two days past he has come here as if he had never been sent away. I let him be in the sub-editorial room, since nobody comes there during the afternoon, and he sleeps."

"Take me to him," said Noellet.

The man led them through a padded door and along a passage. At the end was the sub-editorial room, with its vulgar fittings and green wall-papers, a long table running down the middle, overhung with gas-jets in the shape of circumflex accents, each capped with a fringed shade, and there, on a sofa against the wall, his eyes shut, very pale, in a heavy drunken sleep, lay his son.

A great pity overcame the father. Before him rose the remembrance of the strong, healthy Vendéean he had reared. Could that emaciated young man lying there really be his Pierre? Was the thin blue blood which hardly coloured his brow the red blood of the Noellets that had formerly blossomed on his lips? It was, indeed, high time that he should come and carry his child away into his own country!

With two or three rapid strides he crossed the room, and, lifting his son's head with both his hands, cried in a trembling voice:

"Pierre, Pierre, my boy, wake up; it is I!" And as Pierre still did not open his eyes, "It is I," he repeated, "and Antoinette; it is La Genivière come to Paris!"

Antoinette had taken one of the limp hands in hers, and was kissing it as she knelt beside her brother.

The warmth of this child's kiss brought a momentary awakening from the heavy intoxication that was weighing upon Pierre. He opened his eyes, gave a stupefied stare at Antoinette's white cap, and then looked up at his father, who was standing motionless in front of him. A little shudder passed over him, as if of fear.

"Father!" he murmured, "father!"

His head fell back again on the sofa, and the transitory gleam of consciousness that had enabled him to recognize his father was succeeded by the former dull torpor of sleep.

It was a disgraceful sight, this young, handsome, cultivated man lying there like a brute beast, with the inertness of a log. In vain had Pierre cast off his belongings, in vain mixed with the world; he still remained at bottom a man of the people; their passions had but slumbered within him, and they had suddenly awakened as soon as he lost the ambition that had transformed him.

With the first trouble that fell on him he had turned to drink, like any farm labourer who has just received his dismissal.

Julien felt a keen shame, and the look of commiseration on the face of the witness of this scene was acute suffering to him. His honour was never slow to speak, and he came to an abrupt resolution.

"At what hour does he generally wake?" he asked.

"Toward evening. But he is no better in his

mind even then. You can see that he is killing himself, poor lad."

"I do, indeed. Where are his things?"

There was a moment's hesitation; then the man answered:

"I am afraid he has nothing left, Monsieur Noellet; he has sold everything."

"Where does he lodge?"

"He has changed his rooms, and I could not tell you where he lives now."

The farmer made no further inquiries; he did not even trouble himself to consider whether this man might possibly be lying and taking advantage of the exceptional situation into which chance had brought him, for he had but one thought—to go away, to save his son.

"Very well, then," he said "I will take him away at once."

"Where to?"

"Straight to the station."

"There is no train before this evening, Monsieur Noellet."

"I will wait, then. I care about nothing, so that I can get him out of the town. It was on his account alone that I came, you understand, and I wish to take him away."

The man had already got his head out of the window and was hailing an empty cab.

* * * * *

And so it was that the following night Julien Noellet, who sat motionless in the corner of the carriage, took his two children, who were lying on

the opposite seat, back to Vendée. There were no other passengers in the carriage. Paris, already left far behind, was being gradually hidden from view by the villas and thick trees that bordered the line. A line of lights running along some sloping or winding suburban road could just be seen now and then through the opening of a narrow cutting, a last breach giving access to the great city. The train sped along with the slight rolling movement that is so lulling in its effect. Pierre and Antoinette were both asleep, lying nearly full length under the light of the lamp. The old peasant did not tire of contemplating them. His heart was full of tender emotion, full of recollections. At moments, irresistibly overcome with fatigue, he fancied that it was ten years earlier, when they were both still small, and that he was going softly with bare feet about the two rooms at La Genivière to look at his sleeping family.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PIERRE woke up long before they reached La Genivière. His father, who had been waiting for this moment, said:

"Well, my child, do you know where we are going? We are getting near Vendée now. We shall be home before noon. Are you glad?"

But Pierre made no reply. All through the journey he had been in a kind of dreamlike stupor, letting himself be ordered and taken about like a child. Nothing seemed to rouse him out of it, not even the arrival at the farm, the sight and kisses of Mère Noellet, who was half out of her mind with joy, his sisters' questioning, or the familiar surroundings of La Genivière. He was entirely and stupidly indifferent. There was not a spark of life in his eyes, which had been so full of fire. When he now and then spoke a few words, it was as if he was not certain of his speech. He had to make an effort to understand what was said to him, and the effort brought on a fresh collapse. The poison with which he had been saturating himself for months past seemed to have taken all the life out of him. "He is very ill," thought all the good people of La Genivière. And moved with a concealed pity, they did not linger long about him, but dispersed here and there to

their several duties: Marie, Antoinette, the father, and the farm-servant, who had run up on hearing the cart drive in. The daily work began again round Pierre, who sat near the fire burying his face in his hands. Mère Noellet alone, having no heart for work, remained beside him. She had hoped for a happier return of her child. She went from room to room until the evening, ceaselessly looking after and attending upon him, watching and waiting for the other return that she was expecting. But she watched in vain. None of her tender maternal ministrations succeeded in arousing her son from his melancholy torpor. When night came she sorrowfully pointed to the bed which had been his in former times, and Pierre, worn out, lay down and fell fast asleep.

It was near morning, but still quite dark, when Pierre awoke to full consciousness.

He opened his eyes, and trembled. The feeling familiar to his youth came over him again, the shuddering feeling of those moments of waking amid the absolute silence of the country, the sense of the surrounding darkness, of being a mere dot lost in the immensity of shadow. He put his hands out gropingly to feel the smoked posts of his bed. It was really then La Genivière, the nest of his childhood, where he and Jacques had been together in the old happy days. He saw again all the faces of those belonging to him, of Antoinette and Marie, of his father and mother, as if they were actually looking at him through the wall. Dear eyes, full of tender reproach, gazing long and searchingly at him. A thousand visions of the

past rose up before him. And with delight Pierre became aware that he had recovered the free power of thought. He rose and put his ear to the door. He could hear the calm breathing of his sleeping sisters. He went and looked up the wide opening under the sloping projection of the great chimney-piece. He could see the stars, already paling, passing overhead. A little chirrup came from a bird in the courtyard. It was the robin redbreast at roost on the wood-stack, a vigilant watchman, who was in the habit during the night of making known in this way that all was well. Pierre recognized the sound and smiled. He lay down again, and continued his gentle dreaming, greatly moved at finding himself at home once more, and at feeling the child's heart being born anew within him. Soon he heard a linnet giving notice of the dawn with a hesitating prelude of song, then it was a blackbird, and the magpies giving chase to one another among the trees of the ravine. A flight of crows brushed against the roof in the early twilight. A glimmer of light shot through the window: the dawn! the dawn!

And the father, coming out of his room, crept up to the side of his son's bed, and to his astonishment found him awake.

"Are you feeling better, my boy?" he asked.

"Yes, father."

"Do you remember that I came to fetch you from Paris the day before yesterday?"

"Very indistinctly. I could fancy that my coming here was all a dream."

"Are you vexed with me for doing so?"

Pierre turned his head a little aside, as if ashamed, and answered:

"Father, you did well to bring me away."

There was some reluctance and a great deal of pride still in this acknowledgement, but the father went away happy.

Neither on this day nor on any of the succeeding ones did Julien and his son ever refer to the past. Of what use to do so? For the present, however unhappy the past and uncertain the future, the farmer had his child back again, and he asked for nothing more. He knew the value of these truces in life. He was rejoicing in this one. His dear Vendée, he thought, could not fail to be a good adviser to this son she had recovered, and so he held his peace, and let her do her work. Later on one would see—one would talk about things. And the home, being now full again, seemed dearer to him again. He began to come in earlier than had been his custom, and as he looked round on his family the old happy expression it had lost for so long came over his face once more.

As for Pierre, the resurrection had begun. He kept very much to himself, avoided the town, and generally started early in the morning and went right away into the fields. The country welcomed him, and gathered him to her heart with the great tender smile she keeps for those who have loved her. He roved at large about it, walking slowly in whichever direction chance might lead him, listening to the voice of his native Vendée, who had known him when he was young

and glad to be alive. She spoke to him of his childhood. She worked on him with the memories brought back by every step he took; little by little the things which he had thought dead revived within him: peace, energy, confidence in the future—a rather uncertain confidence as yet, but strong enough to be consoling. He took hold of life again, and life took hold of him. The salubrious air of the heaths, the long walks, the calm of mind, all helped to bring back some colour to his cheeks. His eyes regained some of their former brightness, and became less wandering in their expression. He returned home every day a little better and stronger both in mind and body.

There was only one group of trees toward which he never turned his eyes, one direction in which he never walked. So many bitter feelings were still brooding at his heart! How could he bear the sight of that park, of that house, where Madeleine Laubriet reigned as mistress—Madeleine, who before long— Whenever, at some turn of the road, the rounded tops of certain wide-spreading oak-trees or the slender outline of a certain poplar swaying down there in the wind came in view, Pierre quickly turned away.

Was this near neighbourhood of La Landehue the only reason, then, that prevented him for two whole weeks from going to see Mélie Rainette? Alas, no. He accused himself of ingratitude, and reproached himself afresh every day for giving no sign of remembrance, or even the compensation of a word of gratitude, to this unfortunate girl who had suffered ill-treatment on his account. Never-

theless, he kept away from her. He was afraid of the secret that he had once confided to her, and which might give her occasion to triumph over him. "What has become of Madeleine Landehue?" she would say. "My poor friend, she is married." And he seemed to hear the vindictive raillery of Mélie's voice, for her feeling of friendship for him—such was the name he gave to the devotion she had shown him—had probably become embittered by neglect and poverty.

In spite of his fine philosophy, he was surely a bad judge of such a love and such a woman.

However, he at last overcame his reluctance, and one afternoon walked to the town by the path which ran along outside her garden. As he drew near the garden gate, he saw Mélie Rainette, who was pretending to be busy weeding. She had been working like this for some hours every day for nearly a fortnight past, in daily expectation of the visit which he more than owed her. He was struck with her pallor, and with the somewhat scornful dignity of her manner. She reminded him of Madonnas he had seen at exhibitions in Paris, with her eyes that, set in their dark circles, looked too large for the small oval of the face.

She showed no sign of surprise on seeing him, and went up to the gate before he had time to open it.

He had better perhaps remain on the further side as if a mere passer-by, since the town had given her such a bad name. He understood, and remained standing, watching her approach. She was poorly clad in a very shabby dress—she,

Mélie, formerly so dainty in her attire—and had on wooden shoes. She looked almost like a beggar.

She paused, leaning on the handle of her garden spade.

"You were passing this way?" she said sadly.

"No, I have come to see you. I ought to have come before, I know——"

"You owed me nothing," she interrupted; "there is no need to make excuses. Have you been ill?"

"Yes."

"With trouble, I suppose? My poor Pierre, if you knew how distressed I felt for you when I heard that Madeleine Laubriet was going to be married."

There was no mockery in her voice—far from it. She looked so kind and sympathetic that her pity quite overcame him. He yielded to the bitter pleasure enjoyed by those who suffer, and began talking of his own trouble.

"If you knew," he said, "what it is to love, and all at once to feel oneself despised, rejected, as I have been."

"Yes, I know; the heart breaks under it."

"I felt so lonely, Mélie, when this dream, which had been with me since I was a child, was taken from me."

"In truth, when a sorrow like that falls upon one, it seems as if there was no longer any meaning in life. As for work, it becomes altogether distasteful."

"Yes, I left off work; I lost my post; I was out

of my senses. And I am still, truth to say, for there is not an hour of the day when I am not thinking of her."

"To dwell on that which never can and never will be, that is torture."

"Yes, Mélie, and to recall the days of hope is another."

"One has no power to drive away the memory of those days; whether they were happy or unhappy, they are all sad now in some way or other. And you made so many sacrifices for her, Pierre."

"They were all for her, Mélie—even the sacrifice of my parents."

"They cost you nothing, then."

"Nothing; I offered them to her as secret pledges of my love."

"But I expect you have counted them over since in anger, asking yourself how so much devotion, so much affection lavished for years——"

"For ten years."

"Yes, for years and years, could have been unperceived by her."

"Yes, it is so, as you say."

"How any one could trample a poor human being under foot as heedlessly as one might an uncomplaining bit of ivy or moss."

"It is wonderful, Mélie. How exactly you understand these things!"

One of those smiles that lessen none of the sadness of a face, for they come from the sad depths of the heart, rose to Mélie's lips.

"I?" she said. "My life has been very lonely,

and I have known some suffering. That is how I come to understand."

"Yes, Mélie, you with your heart and your intelligence, you can understand how I feel picturing her as the wife of another man—a man inferior to me in intellect—who has neither fought nor suffered for her as I have, and who had neither reputation, nor any artistic or scientific work, or self-made fortune, nor indeed the least personal effort or sacrifice to offer her in homage. Ah, would I knew what was in the hearts of these rich girls, and how these favoured ones feel! I would I knew for certain whether she ever felt for me——"

"What?"

"The least feeling akin to love; a secret esteem or even just a little pity."

"Do not think about that, Pierre. There is only one thing for you now: to set to work and resign yourself to fate."

"I am far from that as yet."

"Not so far as you think. With a little courage, you will soon have overcome all your anger and resentment, and be able to wish happiness to those who have ignored you, even though it cannot come from you——"

"Never! You do not know me."

"You will be able to say to yourself, should you ever see her again, 'You, whom I loved, I know that I can never be anything to you; nevertheless, I am happy if you are happy.'"

And she added very softly:

"Believe me, Pierre, it is possible."

Pierre Noellet looked with astonishment at the unpretending weaver of Fief-Sauvin, who, in this simple and natural way, was urging upon him so dignified and noble an attitude of behaviour.

"Mélie," he said, "I am not so perfect as you; I feel weak and passionate, but I thank you all the same. You have done me good."

Again the sad smile crossed the girl's face, and she said:

"It is because we have been talking of her."

"Perhaps. I shall come and see you again, Mélie."

"At the end of another fortnight?"

"Don't be spiteful. Where shall I be this day fortnight? I dare not think about it. No, to-morrow."

"But to-morrow, Pierre, is your sister's wedding day."

"Just so. You can guess that I shall run away from all that noise and gaiety as quickly as I can. And since you are not among the invited guests, I shall come here after supper, may I?"

"Yes, while the dancing is going on down there. How happy Marie is!"

Mélie Rainette could not finish her sentence.

Pierre's unconscious cruelty, the contrast between Marie's fate and her own, were too much for her courageous resolutions, and she began to cry.

"You are hurt at not having been invited?" said Pierre. "It is partly my fault, my dear girl; forgive me."

He put his arm over the gate and took her hand.

"To-morrow, then," he added; "to-morrow."

But no look of pleasure came into Mélie's face; on the contrary, her eyes filled with a deep sorrow, and she replied, her voice choked with tears, which she tried in vain to check:

"Yes, Pierre, to-morrow we will talk about her again."

He left her feeling disturbed. This Mélie, what was the matter with her? She was a girl of humble birth, but certainly of very refined mind, and with such keen perception of feeling.

"Yes," thought Pierre to himself, "she said several things to me which would never have occurred to many better educated women. I talked of nothing but myself and my troubles. She had no complaint to make, and yet life has been hard for her, too. She would make an excellent wife, self-sacrificing and devoted; strong, faithful natures like hers must bring great happiness to those who are born to be happy."

He went along the path till he reached the spot near Mélie's garden, whence, on account of a gap in the hedge, one could get a view of Landehue. He turned his head, and there suddenly before him was the park, with its great masses of trees, and the meadows with their hawthorn hedges. Alas, those fresh young leaves! Those newly-raked paths that widened out in front of the white stone flight of steps, those flowering beds silent, that house which one felt was on the point of throwing open its doors, were they not all signs of the approaching nuptial? He passed quickly on and reached La Genivière. There, in the courtyard, he found three youths setting up a tall Maypole,

round which were hung barrels garnished with bottles. Their loud laughter, the blows of their pickaxes and bars of iron on the flinty ground could be heard far afield. La Genivière also was preparing for festivity. To-morrow Marie was to be married. The Mauges would soon be able to boast of another happy family. Marie had loved a plain blacksmith; she had been without ambition, and had found happiness.

"And I?" thought Pierre sorrowfully, "and I?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

It was a fine affair, this wedding of Marie's. The sun, without which nothing is beautiful, had joined in the festivity from early morning. Its rays fell warmly through the breaks in the gray mesh of clouds that covered the sky. The temperate joy of the weather shed its influence on all around. Clothed in the mild light, the houses of Fief-Sauvin took on an air of amiability. The bells rang out so clearly that all the Mauges must have heard them. The whole population of the town was at their doors. And when, as the clock struck ten, Marie emerged from the church on the arm of Louis Fauvêpre, when the fiddler rushed from the tavern to take his place at the head of the procession, which was to escort Marie home, then was the time for every one to admire Marie's bridal dress of black poplin, her thick-ribbed shawl of white silk, the flowing ribbons which fell from her waist to the ground, her fine lace headdress, and the wreath that might have been gathered from the orange-trees of La Landehue. A handsome pair, in truth! Louis Fauvêpre radiant, Marie bashful at the many eyes turned upon her, and at her own happiness, which she could not hide. The fiddler himself was proud of them. What flourishes of the bow! How the thin fingers of the humpbacked tailor flew over

the strings! As he passed along playing, the young people began fidgeting their feet, moved with a longing to dance, while the old ones grew bold enough to walk a few steps without their sticks, which they waved above their heads.

There were at least two hundred persons in the procession—all the relations and all the friends, except Mélie Rainette, were there. They passed slowly down through the town, and then, turning off the high road, followed the path that led to the farm. Hardly a year had passed since they had all trod that same way; it was the same time of year; the same apple trees were in flower, the same wind blowing through the trees, but then they were carrying Jacques to his grave.

Were there any among them who remembered this? The trees did, without doubt, for they gave to the happiness that was passing what they had given before to the sorrow—a rain of white blossoms.

And still the fiddle went on with its tune, which was no less enlivening than a call to hounds. When, as the bridal party neared the farm, the boys in hiding behind the banks began shooting off their pistols, and duck-guns, and blunderbusses to "kill the bride," causing everybody to scream, its shrill voice could still be heard above the fusillade. The fiddle was afraid of nothing. Its song was very old. It had played for the farmers to dance before the Revolution, and perhaps for the soldiers among the broom, during the great war. The willows by the Evre knew it well. And so they repeated it with a good will, as the

bride and bridegroom entered the courtyard, where the Maypole was standing, surrounded below by bundles of wood and at the top by bottles; as the bride took her place at table, and as the guests, towards the middle of dinner, rose for the *danse des présents*, each having brought his offering—a piece of cloth from Cholet, glass candlesticks, piles of plates, or, like the magnificent lady of independent fortune, Mére Mitard, a cleft stick hung with silver pieces.

The dinner, which lasted three hours, was given under the shed, which was supplemented by a tent that had been hired, together with the benches, the tables, and other things, from a caterer at Beaupréau. After it was over they danced on the threshing-floor; there were jigs and gavottes, and even a sort of quadrille introduced by the regimental friends of Louis Fauvêpre, all to the same, or very nearly the same, tune. Two bagpipes had now come to the assistance of the fiddle. The uproarious revelry and violent exertion of body and legs went on till dark, under the open sky and the eye of the elders who sat in groups round the rising ground.

And, it being then late, they all sat down again to table.

The earlier exuberance of spirit had now subsided. A few dark, handsome, young farmers' sons, as powerful as their oxen, still continued to joke, and talked of dancing again after supper. But most of the guests were beginning to feel the fatigue of the long drawn-out festivities. The girls, with tired faces, became grave and silent, and

made but feeble response to the advances of their admirers. The elder women were already thinking of the return home with a driver not quite too sure of his way. They shot stealthy glances at their husbands, their sons, or brothers, and seeing them either redder or paler in face than was natural to them, they greeted the broad jokes and the obligatory songs on such occasions as the present with only perfunctory smiles. For the good old custom of past times was over; the women no longer brought their deep goblets, nor the men the little cups of silver plate, which they hung from their button-holes, a wise and temperate practice! Only a few old men still kept it up. The others drank their full glasses of wine from the slopes of the Loire and the Sèvre, and grew more and more excited, to the despair of the women, who became increasingly irresponsive and uneasy.

Nothing can be more lugubrious than a feast in certain states of mind. All day Pierre Noellet had been fighting against the dark melancholy that had taken possession of him, destroying all happiness and courage, all revived hope and calm forgetfulness of the past, and hiding all the summits. The noisy hilarity of these vigorous and simple-hearted people was offensive to him. Their shouts of laughter gave him pain. He longed to get away. He took part in his sister's wedding as a stranger might have done, seating himself at a corner of the shed near the door. Even the sight of Marie and Louis Fauvêpre, so tranquilly happy and whispering to each other at the end of the table, irritated him and drove him outside.

Toward the end of supper, Antoinette and another young girl rose, and together, hand in hand, they went and stood before the bride. There was a partial lull of tongues. The girls, both very shy, looked at each other, in order that they might start together, and then, with their untrained voices, drawling the final syllables, they began to sing a song which their grandmothers had sung more than a hundred years before:

The nightingale of the woods.
The wild nightingale,
The nightingale of love
Who sings night and day!

He says in his beautiful song,
In his pretty language;
Maidens, marry,
For marriage is sweet.

At this moment Louis Fauvêpre's wife, overcome with emotion, as tradition also required, hid her face in her cambric pocket-handkerchief. All the guests now rose and climbed on to the benches to see the bride in tears. And in the commotion that ensued Pierre made his escape.

He suddenly found himself under the blue night-sky. He withdrew to the end of the threshing-floor. How calm everything was down there in the valley! How peacefully it lay sleeping under the moon! At these few paces away from the shed, the pitiable buzz of human enjoyment was so lost in the great silence that one would hardly have known that an entertainment was there drawing to its hilarious close. The bushes bent

beneath the weight of their dew-laden leaves. A pungent, marshlike odour rose from the fields beside the Evre. And what numberless stars there were overhead! The three in the Belt of Orion shone out from among them all, and their eyes, that were once so full of dreams, were now looking down filled with an infinite pity. Pierre could not draw his own away from them.

He remembered his promise, and began walking slowly along the path that led to Mélie's house. His shadow, thrown on the bank trampled by the animals, followed him all the way. La Genivière lay hidden behind the thick curtain of trees, and the fiddle was beginning again to send forth its weak, squeaky tune.

Pierre Noellet, this is a dangerous path for you. You know it well. You know the exact spot before you reach Mélie's house, whence you can see La Landehue, its lawns, even its flower-beds, looking gray to-night in the moonlight, beside the bright gravel paths. In your sad frame of mind you will not be able to pass the opening without looking beyond it. What would you do, if you were to see him and her, back this evening from Italy and taking possession of their kingdom, in the avenue that curves round to the fields, walking slowly side by side, as the newly happy love to wander amid the things of the past?

And it is indeed no fancy! The marks of the carriage wheels are fresh upon the gravel. And see! Those two shadowy figures, so close to each other that at moments they look like one—they

are Jules de Ponthual and Madeleine. They are coming his way.

Pierre jumped over the hedge, and darted behind a clump of chestnut trees that stood about fifty yards from the avenue. What was he going to do? Did he know himself? He had run forward directly she had appeared. He must see her again, even if on another's arm. Should he suffer for it, die for it, he must look on her once more!

He had completely forgotten you, Mélie Rainette, who were waiting for him! He remained hidden beside a cluster of saplings, his head thrust forward through the leaves, with his eyes turned to the left.

The darkness was thick around him, but on that side the branches had been cut so as to form an arch, through which could be seen a corner of the park illuminated by the soft, sleeping light.

The young couple came slowly toward him. Soon he was able to catch the sound of their two voices.

"That playing of bagpipes and fiddle," said Ponthual, "makes me long to go on to La Geniviève. Will you come and see them dance? It would be amusing."

Madeleine paused at the edge of the patch of shadow thrown across the path by the copse wood. She looked up at her husband with a little coaxing pout of reproach. Some indescribable and fleeting charm was added to the severe beauty of her face and form by the pale light that fell around her.

"Amusing, perhaps," she said; "but it is so nice out here!"

"How right you are!" he answered. And he drew her along, laughing in his loud, happy way.

"Do you know what has become of Pierre Noellet?" he added after they had gone a little farther.

"Nothing very good, I fear. We have seen nothing of him since December. My father has written to him twice, but there has been no reply."

"Really? I can hardly believe it."

"What is more, he took the trouble to go to the *Don Juan*, and there he was told that Pierre Noellet no longer came regularly to work, and that when he did, he was in such a state."

"You don't say so!"

"A boy to whom we showed every kindness, even admitting him into the family circle. You can understand that my father did not persist in his inquiries."

"Poor Noellet, what a pity! To come to an end like that!"

"It is, indeed; but only what might have been expected."

"How? He was intelligent, and had very good wits."

She gave a little smile.

"Quite so; but not better than many others. And with it all he had such a wild, extravagant ambition, thinking that he could take the world by storm in a way that is only possible to those of very exceptional talents, and even then they have to work for some time. For one who suc-

ceeds there are a hundred who fail miserably. He is a proof of it."

"There is more truth in what you say than you think, perhaps," replied Ponthual rather gravely; "an extravagant ambition—that may well be so. I confess I was very much struck by something that happened, and which I cannot help at this moment associating with his rapid downfall, which does not look unlike desperation. You remember the 28th, when I told Noellet about our coming marriage, that last time we saw him?"

"Yes."

"He turned pale and trembled; his whole face changed. At first I attributed his emotion to the surprise caused him by my news. But, on my faith, I begin to think there was something more."

They were just then passing the spot where Pierre lay hidden.

Madeleine looked questioningly at her husband.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, my dear, I have no need to tell you that you are attractive, and perhaps that unhappy boy——"

"How can you!" she exclaimed with a touch of temper. "You do not know what you are saying. He has great ambition, as I believe; but not to the extent of forgetting our relative positions. When all's said and done, Pierre Noellet never was, and never will be, anything but a peasant."

And they passed on, their talk drifting to other subjects.

As they were leaving the shade of the trees and turning into the quiet light of the fields they heard behind them a rustling among the leaves. Madeleine, frightened, pressed close to her husband. Ponthual turned leisurely round to listen, looking in the direction of the thicket. He could hear that the sound was going farther off.

"Don't be alarmed," he said, shrugging his shoulders; "it's only some frightened animal running away."

The trees were too thick for them to distinguish the figure of Pierre Noellet, who was fleeing in despair. "He never was, and never will be, anything but a peasant." And it was she who had said it! She who was laughing at him! She had not only never detected the love which had driven the farmer's son away from the land, and had been the cause of so many struggles and so much suffering; it had never even entered her head that it was possible. Not only had he wasted and lost his youth, but he was scorned, despised by her whom he had loved, condemned to be nothing for ever but a peasant in her eyes and those of the world! The only word of pity vouchsafed to him had come from Jules de Ponthual!

He ran forward like a madman, straight ahead across the fields. He fled, pursued by the vision of their happiness and by this contemptuous judgment passed on all his past ambition.

Thinking, no doubt, that his wild race would bring him again to the spot where he had climbed the bank with ease, he unfortunately mistook the direction, and came to the hedge where it faced

Mélie's garden. At this point the field rose six feet or more above the foot-path. In spite of the delirious condition he was in, Pierre Noellet by daylight would have seen the gulf yawning in front of him. But blinded by his tears and deceived by the shadow of the immense stumps of trees that lined the path, he saw nothing. Suddenly the ground failed beneath his feet, and, unable to check his impetuous flight, he fell with violence into the hollow below. A cry rang through the night.

Jules and Madeleine, already some way off, stopped a moment to listen in the direction whence the cry had come, but, hearing nothing farther, went on toward the park.

But, close by, in the little garden, some one was watching, waiting for a promised visit.

On hearing Pierre's cry, Mélie ran to the gate and opened it, and went down the garden steps. There on the ground before her lay Pierre, face downward, his feet in the shadow, the upper part of his body in the light. He was lying motionless.

Mélie called him by name: "Pierre! Pierre Noellett!" Only the great silence of the path answered her.

Overcome with terror, she knelt beside him on the stones, leaning over him and calling again, "Pierre!"

And as he still gave no sign of life, she put back his arms, that had fallen forward, and gently lifted his head a little way from the ground. Alas, she drew back her hands covered with blood! Pierre, white as death and with closed eyes, lay in a pool of blood, his forehead battered in by the stones.

Mélie Rainette wanted to call for help. She was

alone. She had not the strength to carry or drag him as far as the house; and this wound, this red stream staining the white stones one by one. She must get assistance. Perhaps some one in the village would hear her, but she could not make her voice speak; she felt herself beginning to swoon.

The sound of a man's approaching footsteps roused her.

It was the farmer from La Genivière, who, uneasy at his son's abrupt manner of leaving the feast, had come out in search of him.

"Oh, come," she cried, "he has fallen jumping on to the path; he is hurt; come quickly!"

"Was it his cry I heard just now, Mélie?"

"Yes, I was close by; I heard him, and I ran at once. He hasn't moved since, and see how he is losing blood; he is going, perhaps——"

"Poor lad!" said the farmer, going up to his son; "and I thought he had run away into the Mauges." Then he added: "Help me to carry him away from here, Mélie, for I am getting old."

He lifted Pierre in his arms, and with Mélie's assistance carried him inside the gate, and laid him on the mossy slope that ran round the garden. Then the father stooped, and took his son's head on to his breast. The moon was shining on the little bank, and ah, now in the full light, how much more terrible it was! The blood, how it poured from the wound streaming over the farmer's gay waistcoat, which was still adorned on one side with a flower from Marie's nosegay. Mélie had run to fetch water to bathe that broad, deep gash, whence the life-blood was escaping.

The farmer, accustomed as he was to the rough wounds caused by scythes and bill-hooks, was not at first so alarmed as Mélie; but when he saw that Pierre continued motionless, and that his breathing was growing fainter, he was seized with anguish. Trembling and in tears, he looked at the girl whom he had driven away, and whom he met again so unexpectedly at this crisis of troubles.

"Ah!" he cried, "perhaps he will never come to again!"

At that moment Pierre opened his eyes, and said slowly, and with great effort:

"Father, are you there?"

His eyes were fixed and glazed; they could no longer see.

"Yes, my son," said the farmer. "I am here; I am holding you. Do you feel my arm, there, under your shoulder? Are you badly hurt, my dear boy?"

"Where is Jacques?" said Pierre.

Jacques had also asked, "Where is my brother, the abbé?"

The farmer saw that he was wandering, and not wishing to agitate him, replied:

"He is far away."

"Yes, yes, far away, far away. I did him harm, and you, too. Forgive—and you must forgive Mélie, too—she did not lead me wrong—No, Mélie is good. You know, the one who gives us the palms. This for you—for your mother—for Antoinette."

He paused, seized with a convulsive shudder.

It was evident that death was near. The unhappy father had seen too many die to doubt it.

"Run, Mélie," he said, "run quickly, and bring the priest; our boy is dying!"

She threw down the handkerchief stained with blood, and rushed away. She had hardly reached the bottom of the garden when Pierre again moved his lips.

"I cannot hear," said Julien, "speak again; if you can, say it again, dear."

And he put his ear closer to the bleeding head of his child.

"He will not have time to come," murmured Pierre. "Give me your rosary."

The old farmer, sobbing, felt in his pocket, and put the rosary in the wounded man's hand.

With a last effort, Pierre put up his hand to find his mouth, pressed the little black cross to his lips, and with his kiss upon it passed away.

At that moment a confused sound of cheering rose in the direction of La Genivière, and the sky above the farm was lighted by a red flame that sent up its smoke in wreaths of cloud toward the stars. They were burning the Maypole. The shouts were the final salutes in honour of Marie's wedding.

The festivities were drawing to a close as, alone in the Rainette garden, the farmer laid the head of his dead son back upon the bank.

* * * * *

The next morning at this Genivière, that had been so abruptly plunged into mourning, Mélie Rainette rose with the first gray light of dawn from beside the bed on which Pierre Noellet was laid.

For many long hours she had kept her watch; she had been there of her own accord, and with the permission of sorrow, and the farmer had knelt beside her through the night, hardly aware, as it seemed, of her presence. Buried in mournful stupor, he appeared to see and hear nothing. But as she was about to leave the room he called her.

"Stay, my daughter," he said, and Mélie could not remember ever having heard him speak in so kind and tender a voice.

And as she still hesitated, not knowing what he meant, he repeated:

"Stay; you loved him as well as we did, my poor girl. Stay here in memory of him. I have lost my two sons—and"—he looked as he spoke toward Louis Fauvêpre, who was standing in a corner of the room—"one I have found again; you will replace the other!"

CHAPTER XXX.

FOUR months later Monsieur Laubriet was driving in his phæton along the road from Beaupréau to Fief-Sauvin on his way to Landehue. As the horses were walking up the hill at the entrance to the town, he caught sight of the farmer from La Genivière in a field to the right of the road.

Julien Noellet's hair had turned quite white. He hardly did any work, leaving the ploughing to others, and contenting himself with breaking the clods, which he did in a dreamy way, and with many pauses between his feeble blows.

Monsieur Laubriet waved his hand to him.

"Good day, my poor Noellet!"

The peasant lifted his hat without replying. But not because this compassionate address affected him at all. It merely disturbed that long reverie of the aged, who are alone for many hours occupied with easy tasks. He leaned on his hoe with his arms crossed, and looked toward his farm.

The harvest had been a good one for Julien Noellet. His granaries were full. From where he stood he could see the top of the large yellow haystack between the trees that were still green with leaf. And although the autumn had hardly begun, the ploughed land gave token that young and active hands had undertaken the direction of the farm.

Louis Fauvêpre, Julien's worthy son and successor, was at this moment at the other end of the field. Six oxen, as in former days, were drawing the furrows across the violet-coloured earth. Louis Fauvêpre was at the plough; neither his gait nor his style of ploughing were similar to that of the old man, who had been in the habit of leaning far forward to keep his eye on a certain spot between the muzzles of his beasts. Very upright, with a graceful ease of strength, he was holding the cast-iron handles of a new plough without any sign of effort.

Having reached the end of the field, he ordered the ploughman to lead the beasts to the grassy border under the hedge, for Marie, his young wife, the real mistress of the white house, had just arrived with the three o'clock soup, and she was standing waiting, with her usual look of quiet and dignified happiness, a little red in the face, and more out of breath than seemed warranted by so short a walk.

The old farmer, as he noticed this, slowly drew himself up, and upon his face, that had suddenly brightened, the face of the grandfather, dawned the smile of immortal hope.

THE END

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